

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx arched an eyebrow and glared at the file that Bob had just handed her. She hated to arch that particular eyebrow, but Bob had recently shaved the other one off to get revenge on her starching his underwear.

"What's this?"

"A story," replied Bob, buffing his nails. "We just punched another ticket, the Harry/Daphne ticket, and managed to turn the Potters into evil idiots instead of the just plain idiots that JKR portrayed them as."

Alyx's expression darkened. "We've had this discussion before! It makes perfect sense to hide from a dark lord and lounge around your house without your weapon. Just because you shower with a handgun in arms reach and sleep with a shotgun under the bed doesn't mean everyone else would."

Bob took a step back and puffed up. "I wouldn't have to sleep like that if you would just stop sending out random death threats to celebrities and mafia bosses."

"A girl has to have a hobby," she retorted.

"And power tools wasn't good enough? You've redesigned the entire Kama Sutra thanks to Sears power tools."

"Meh," Alyx replied with a wave of her hand, dismissing the complaint. "I seem to recall you enjoying it for the most part, and the painful parts were over quick."

Her expression brightened and she smiled evilly. "Do you want to know what use I've discovered for that industrial powered laser lathe?"

Bob blanched and backed away. "We don't own Harry Potter!" he shouted, then he turned and sprinted off stage with Alyx in hot pursuit.

The Fall of the House of Potter

Little Whinging, Surrey, July 31st...

Harry puffed lightly as he topped the crest of a small hill. He was nearly four miles into the five miles he ran daily since returning to Privet Drive.

Running was his escape from Privet Drive and the Order.

Nothing seemed to go right this past year. Dumbledore continued to ignore him, just as he did during the last school term. He'd grown distant from Hermione and Ron, as both seemed to act as though Dumbledore could do no wrong.

Since the beginning of the summer he had been in contact with only two friends, Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood. Luna knew about muggle post, though he wasn't sure how, and she had taught Neville how to use it. Harry replied to his friends via a mail drop that the Quibbler maintained. From his other friends, there had been nothing but silence.

Over the past year, the war had continued to worsen and Harry had developed a small touch of paranoia. He had been developing his abilities steadily, although he felt he was far from confronting Voldemort. In a fit of paranoia driven intuition, he spent the past year working on being able to cast illusions wandlessly. It wasn't much and would serve no real purpose in defeating Voldemort. But it did grant him a small measure of freedom, since he had enough power to make the illusions last for hours. More than enough to allow him to slip by his minders, who were intent on keeping him under house arrest in Privet Drive.

It was enough to keep the meddlesome Order out of his hair while he went running every day.

Had Dumbledore and his crowd known, they would have been surprised by the ability. Most wizards weren't powerful enough to make an illusion last for more than a few minutes.

He had just entered a small clearing when Voldemort appeared with several of his followers.

He was still running, and with no time to really think about what he was doing, he whipped out his wand and used it to stab Bellatrix LeStrange in the throat. When she collapsed, blood fountaining

through her fingers, he kept running, his wand dripping blood. Bellatrix convulsed and twitched on the ground, her expression one of confusion as she bled to death.

Harry then barreled into McNair, pushing the man into the path of a killing curse from Bellatrix's husband, Rudolpho.

Rolling to his feet, he hit LeStrange with a reductor that blew his left leg off at the hip. The older man went down hard, screaming in pain and shock. With multiple arteries fountaining blood, he would bleed out in a matter of minutes. Bellatrix would not be alone for long in hell.

When the hair on the back of his neck stood up, he dropped down and rolled as another curse flew over his head. Regaining his feet, he spun to face Voldemort, surprised to find that the Dark Lord now stood alone.

"Excellent work, Harry," Voldemort said, his wand pointing at Harry's chest.

Harry shrugged. "What can I say? You have shitty help, Tom. If they represent the best of pure blood society, then they deserve to be killed off."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed and he fired off a volley of curses, which Harry either dodged or deflected. Then it was Harry's turn and to Voldemort's surprise he returned a volley of intensely overpowered school level curses. One reductor hit close enough to throw Voldemort backwards and stun him for a second.

Groaning softly, he climbed to his feet. "Now, Harry, why must we fight? Don't you realize you've been manipulated into this? Join with me. You will be my second and rule by my side as my heir."

Harry smirked at him. "I know about Dumbledork's manipulations. And I thought heirs were for people who expect to die. Last I heard, you wanted to avoid that, Tom."

Voldemort fired off another volley of curses and Harry dodged most of them. A few he rebounded at Voldemort, causing the wizard to dodge his own curses. Both men paused to catch their breaths.

"Harry, you only think you know of Albus' manipulations. You've been duped, boy, and you don't even know the half of it. We have it in us to hurt each other greatly and you've been trained to be Dumbledore's obedient little prophecy weapon. You haven't been given all the facts."

Harry glanced around the clearing making sure no help had arrived for Voldemort. "Oh? Enlighten me then," he replied with a feigned casualness. He had known a lot about Dumbledore's manipulations, but Voldemort was making it sound like there were still pieces he didn't know.

Voldemort lowered his wand and used the international dueling sign to signal a lull in the fighting. Harry nodded and marginally pointed his wand away from Voldemort, acknowledging the lull.

"I never killed your parents. I was surprised to find you home alone, unattended."

"Liar! What about when our wands locked up at your rebirth?"

"A sham. Dumbledore arranged for you to get the brother wand, a wand he had already prepared in case you and I fought. What we saw was a carefully crafted trick created by Dumbledore. I mean seriously Harry, 'a wand chooses the wizard'? How silly can you get? How can a stick with a feather or a heart string choose anything? You were tested against multiple blank wands until finally they gave you a wand with a magical core - the wand they had prepared for you."

Voldemort shook his head sadly. "You've been played all your life, Harry Potter. You were groomed from birth to fulfill the prophecy. But your parents were not killed by me, that much I do know. Regretfully, I couldn't walk into the Ministry building and proclaim my innocence. After all, there are other... ah... indiscretions in my past, which they might take exception to."

"Words, nothing more. What proof do you have?" Harry spat.

"What proof do I need? I'm not the one who has been abandoned. Your mother's hatred towards her sister was well known by everyone who went to school with her. Do you honestly think they would leave a will stating that you were to be left with her? You

should have been raised in a pure blood home. Merlin knows you're related to half the pure bloods in our world. I offer my oath that I did not kill James and Lily Potter. If they are dead, they were not killed by my hand or the hand of any of my Death Eaters."

Voldemort's wand tip flared to signal the acceptance of the oath. He then smiled at Harry's consternation.

No one had ever mentioned anything about a will to him, but several people, mostly Remus and Sirius, had mentioned that Lily had not liked her sister at all. What did the will say? If there was no will, then the courts would have sent him to a home and arranged for someone to check up on him. If there was a will, just what did it say and why wasn't it followed? Or was it?

The more he pondered it, the angrier he got. Someone had just shown Harry that his entire life might be a lie and he hated that it was his mortal foe that had been the one to reveal that truth to him.

Voldemort's smirk changed into a snarl and his wand whipped up, casting a killing curse.

Harry, already enraged, replied with a simple transference spell. It created two spheres, one in front of him and another behind the caster of the incoming spell. The killing curse entered his sphere and vanished.

Voldemort stared in shock at the black hole that his curse had vanished into. He started to turn just as the curse blasted out of the second hole, hitting him in the back. He crumpled to the ground, then a second later both spheres exploded. The spell had not been designed to handle the kind of energies generated by a Dark Lord.

In fact, it was an old Quidditch training spell, used to train beaters to stay on their toes. For the remainder of Harry's life he would wonder why he chose to use that particular spell.

The simple fact that it was Voldemort's own curse that killed him invoked a unique state of magic, which caused all of his Horcruxes to assume he had willingly committed suicide. Around the country, a number of dangerously cursed objects exploded violently as the soul fragments broke free and crossed over.

The Dark Lord had been killed by a school boy spell that had been overpowered beyond all that was possible. His insurance of immortality was wiped out because it was his own spell and his own magic that had ended his life.

Harry's legs trembled and he placed both hands on his knees while he tried to catch his breath. Around him he could hear the pops of arriving wizards.

The Lincolnshire Cottage, July 31st...

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's today. Another year has passed," she replied softly.

He blinked in surprise and adjusted his glasses nervously. "Look, Lils, it's only going to be a few more years. Dumbledore says that things are nearly ready and then we'll be able to come out of hiding. He's still working on drawing the Dark Lord into a trap."

Lily turned and faced James. "Are you sure? I know Dumbledore is never wrong, but he's our son, James!"

James scowled. "Dumbledore says he has a very forgiving nature. Besides, we have been working hard for our side all this time. That has to count for something. Harry will forgive us, I'm certain of it. In the meantime, we follow the plan."

Lily nodded and allowed herself to be hugged by her husband. It wasn't often that she doubted the plan that Dumbledore, James and herself had come up with.

The biggest doubt came right after Harry had been attacked. It hadn't happened the way it was supposed to and the results frightened her. Peter was supposed to be babysitting Harry while they attended a meeting of the executive council of the Order to finalize their plans. What they didn't know was that Peter was a traitor to the cause.

Voldemort had attacked because of a false prophecy created by Dumbledore and had been temporarily banished before they could deal with his horcruxes. That had forced them to make some painful decisions. Sacrifices had had to be made. It was wartime!

James leaned down and kissed the top of his wife's head. "It will be all right, Lils," he murmured. He had faith in Dumbledore and so did she, most of the time.

"What do you think he's doing? Is he happy?" she asked softly from the comfort of his arms.

"It doesn't matter," James replied heavily. "It's war and we agreed that we needed to make sacrifices. Besides, Harry's locked up in Privet Drive with our very best watching over him. He's safe and probably reading a book at the moment."

Reassured, Lily nodded against her husband's chest.

Hogwarts, Headmaster's office, July 31st...

Albus Dumbledore leaned back in his chair after glancing at his calendar and he smiled. "Happy Birthday, Harry," he said softly and suppressed the urge to chuckle. Harry was once again stuck at Privet Drive and despite his reaching his majority today, Dumbledore firmly believed he had managed to convince the lad to stay with his relatives until someone from the Order came to get him.

Harry's such a nice, pliable lad, he thought. With that thought, he turned his attention to another of his pawns, Severus Snape. He frowned at the thought of the sour potions master. The man had gone to see Voldemort last night and had not returned to the castle until early this morning.

To say that his condition was good would be a gross understatement. Severus staggered back into the castle in the early hours after being brutally tortured by Voldemort for supposedly not finding out where Potter lived during the summer months.

Dumbledore would allow a lot of information to fall into Voldemort's hands via Snape, but that piece of information was too vital to allow him to get it. No, no matter how much Voldemort tortured Snape for his supposed failure, he would not allow the spy to divulge the location of Harry Potter. Potter wasn't really critical to the war effort like he had been led to believe, but it was important that Voldemort thought he was vital.

Dumbledore would never know that his master spy had indeed revealed the location of his carefully controlled Boy-Who-Lived. Snape had finally made his decision about which master he would truly follow. It was a decision he wouldn't live long enough to regret.

"Headmaster, are you there?" said a voice.

He looked up from his ruminations and glanced towards the fire. "Poppy? Is there something wrong?"

Her head bobbed in the fireplace. "I'm afraid so, sir. I'm in Severus' quarters. I was alerted to a problem by one of the house elves."

"Poppy, you know Severus undergoes the Cruciatus whenever..."

"This is different Headmaster," Poppy said firmly. "Severus isn't suffering from a curse. The man is quite ill."

Dumbledore scowled. He couldn't afford for Severus to suffer through a protracted illness.

When he failed to respond to her, Poppy continued. "I am taking Severus up to the infirmary, but if I can't bring his fever down, I'll have to send him on to St. Mungo's."

"Poppy, I'm sure you'll do your very best and it will be, as usual, most effective. But we both know that as long as he bears the Mark we cannot send him to St. Mungo's."

Poppy expression darkened. That Snape was a former Death Eater was a matter of public record. But that didn't mean that old grudges had faded. There had been reports of former Death Eaters who had escaped justice only to fall prey to 'accidents' while under the care of a healer.

"Then you better hope you have enough clout to see to his care if it becomes necessary, Headmaster," she retorted. "I am only a simple healer, not a specialist, and I haven't a single clue as to what is causing Severus' illness. According to the house elf who summoned me, he simply collapsed and began vomiting when the elf delivered a drink. And yes, I checked the drink and the glass for poisons and potions. It was untouched and came up clean. According to the elf, he hadn't even touched the glass when he fell ill."



Dumbledore nodded grimly. "Very well, Poppy. Please keep me updated on his condition."

Poppy nodded and withdrew from the fire.

Alone once more, Dumbledore glanced around his office, a small seed of worry beginning to take root. So many things relied on his plans for Snape. He'd have to consider carefully what he would need to do if something happened to the dour Professor.

Even Dumbledore had to admit that Snape had not made many friends in the last decade, but his list of enemies was long and extensive. If someone caused Snape's illness, the list of suspects would be enormous.

Gringotts Bank, August 1st ...

Harry leaned forward in his chair and rubbed his temples with both hands. He felt as though he'd just been punched. "So, it's true, then?"

"I'm afraid so, Master Potter," replied the Goblin. "You see, your parents will never activated. Had it done so, you would have been placed with the Bones Family, or the Longbottoms, or Diggorys. I know your parents will had a number of placement possibilities.

"While the Ministry might have made a legal declaration, we were unable to see to the execution of the will because magic prevented the will from activating. When we told that to the Ministry, they laughed at us and said Dumbledore would handle everything."

The goblin paused and reached for another piece of parchment. "Now, your Godfather's will activated just over a year ago. In fact, we've been waiting for you to reply to the notices we sent every month so that we could execute the will."

Harry looked up from rubbing his temples. This week had been the very worst it could possibly be, and now this? The only ray of light he had managed to find in the whole affair was that Voldemort was dead and the Ministry had agreed to keep it a secret for the time being.

Time, he had told them. He needed time to recover from the battle before becoming the hero of the Wizarding world again. Surprisingly, the lead Unspeakable who'd taken control of the battlefield had readily agreed to his request.

He was surprised to see that the DMLE hadn't been represented when the Ministry arrived on the scene, but he was too engrossed in what Voldemort had told him to worry about how unusual it was to have so many Unspeakables appear.

No one in the Wizarding World, except for Harry and a handful of Unspeakables, knew that Voldemort and his top minions had died yesterday.

The battle hadn't taken long, which surprised him. And other than a case of badly shaken nerves once it was all over, he'd been uninjured.

He had other plans, however. Plans he hadn't told the Unspeakables about. The information Voldemort had given him had to be investigated. The longer the news could be kept secret, the more time he would have to learn the truth about his life and figure out what, if anything, to do about it. His first stop had been Gringotts.

"Is it possible that the will was just ignored? I mean, how else can you explain the fact that I wasn't raised by my parents?" he asked.

Griphook eyed the young human with a bit of a smirk. The information he was gleefully handing over would ignite the Wizarding world in a way that would make Voldemort look like a piker. "Gringotts prides itself on our ability to execute the financial matters for the Wizarding world, Master Potter. Your parents will never be activated because they are not dead."

Harry nodded. He had been told the same thing by Voldemort while they dueled yesterday.

The Goblin watched him carefully. The young human before him seemed to gather himself and the Goblin blinked at what he was seeing.

Power. Undiluted, untrained power. The Wizards had feared Voldemort's power, something that had been augmented by rituals

and tools. The boy who sat before him was something different, something natural and untainted.

The urge to jump to his feet and dance in glee was powerful, but the Goblin restrained himself. He was, after all, a professional. The Wizarding world thought Riddle had been powerful? Little did they know that the boy they had so abused had the power to bring their world to its knees.

"So, they are alive?" Harry asked Griphook, his voice quiet, unemotional. Up until this visit he thought that perhaps someone else had killed them and people just assumed it was Voldemort. He could feel the anger building, snarling inside his skin to lash out, but he ruthlessly smothered it.

"It would appear so, Master Potter," Griphook replied. "We have tried on numerous occasions to bring this to your attention, but you never answered your mail. And other than your first year visit, you haven't been back to the bank. We would have told you then, but your presence at that particular time caught us by surprise and we could not figure out a way of separating you from Dumbledore's agent."

Harry nodded unhappily, Dumbledore had controlled his access to Diagon Alley, and Gringotts. And he had been controlling his mail. In first year he had visited Gringotts with Hagrid, and while he liked the man, he was truly one of Dumbledore's lackeys.

"Do you have any idea where they are?" he asked. He knew about Dumbledore's owl redirect that prevented him from getting any mail from unapproved sources. He thought initially that it had been put in place as a means of screening out fan mail. It was only later when he came to suspect a more sinister reason for the redirect.

Griphook shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The will can tell us only a few things. That they are alive, we are certain, and they are healthy and relatively happy."

Harry looked up sharply. "Happy?"

"Oh, yes. The wax seals represent the color of the emotional state of the will bearers. We routinely monitor that sort of thing so that we know if the client committed suicide or not. Suicide or murder will

often negate parts of a will, or the will in total. The emotional state at the time of death is very important, so the seals are continuously monitored. In your parents case, the seal has been a soft golden color for many years. Had one of your parents been unhappy, half the seal would be another color."

Harry nodded sourly. This was getting worse and worse. "Wait. Didn't the Ministry declare my parents legally dead?"

Griphook leaned back on his chair and nodded with grim satisfaction. The boy was finally starting to think again. Sure, it was a shock, but later would be time enough to grieve. Now was a time for action.

"Yes. There were bodies, after all. We suspected that they were golems, but were never allowed to inspect them. I also understand that the paperwork took a long time to be filed, but eventually even we received copies of the declaration. We can't prove it, but we believe that Dumbledore tried to stall, or even block, the official declarations of death."

Harry's lips twisted. Dumbledore. It always seemed to come back to Dumbledore. "So, what do I do now?"

Griphook slid a parchment and a blood quill across the desk towards him. "I'd suggest you start by signing that document, which acknowledges your elevation to the position of Head of the Ancient and Noble house of Black. Your Godfather also left you papers, which predate his death, proving that he adopted you and listed you as his heir. As Head of the Black family, you would not only outrank any surviving Potters, but have more wealth to tap into."

Griphook pushed another parchment at him. "Since you achieved your majority at the end of last month, you can legally claim Headship of the House of Potter, as well, and especially in light of the legal declaration that your parents are dead."

Griphook gave Harry a feral grin. He knew they were dancing on a technicality, but it was a fault of the Ministry, not the bank. It was a bona fide loophole that he could point out to his client and it was, thanks to the Ministry's own stupidity, completely legal.

Harry signed both documents, then pushed them back to Griphook.

"So, I'm the Head of both Houses? What does that mean, exactly?"

The Goblin shook his head and lamented the fact that the school still used that idiot ghost to teach history. Wizards were woefully unprepared for their lives in the magical world.

Griphook stamped both documents. Duplicates suddenly appeared, then vanished, leaving him with two copies, which he handed back to Harry.

"Those are for your records, my Lord. I suggest you do not lose them, though we can always replace them if need be.

"Now, as to your question. You hold a Lordship. Specifically, you are the ninth Earl of Blackmoor. You hold two seats in the Wizengamot and should you choose a career in public service, it's likely that in a dozen years you could rise to be a recognized power in that body."

"Not bloody likely," Harry muttered darkly. As far as he could tell, his parents being alive was not an act of the Ministry, but that didn't mean he wanted to work for them. Little did he know that before the month was out, he would change his mind about that, and so many other things.

Griphook shot him a toothless smile. "Quite. Now, while your title and role as a Head of House is largely ceremonial these days, there are still several things you can do, without resorting to the courts. Can I assume that you wish to enact some sort of punitive measures against those who have wronged you?"

Harry leaned back in his chair and grinned. This was way more than he ever expected. He never imagined that the Goblins would be this interested in his problems.

"I would be honored to hear your advice, Master Griphook," Harry said softly. "I'm sure your advice and your time is valuable. I would be pleased to make it worth your while."

Griphook nodded and turned to pull out papers he had already prepared. This wizard is smarter than most. Perhaps this one won't be a waste of flesh, he mused.

Gringotts, August 4th...

"My Lord, I am wondering if you have had the opportunity to peruse the documents I sent you?" asked Griphook.

"I have," Harry said, pacing the office. He stopped and looked at the Goblin. "I know what you're talking about, too. You're asking if I found the betrothal contract."

Griphook nodded at the young Lord, who had resumed his pacing. "It is a very old contract, and designed to be used solely by the Head of House. As such, it is not a binding contract. You can opt to pass it on to your heirs. However, before you make such a precipitous decision, I think you should examine the benefits."

Harry slowly turned and looked at Griphook. "Oh?" He was surprised that the Goblin might suggest he consider the contract.

"The family in question is modestly powerful, albeit rather neutral in their political leanings. An alliance between your house and theirs would be to both family's advantage."

"I can't just show up on their doorstep and say 'Hi, I'm here for your daughter!'," he said in protest.

Griphook grinned. "Of course you can't, my Lord." He was extremely pleased to see Harry wasn't dismissing the idea out of hand. "I am certain his Lordship is aware of the contract between your two families, so I would suggest the best way of approaching this would be to send your house elf with a note, asking to meet with him to discuss an issue of mutual interest. In fact, I have prepared such a note, should you want your elf to deliver it."

Harry sat heavily in the seat in front of the desk and took the offered note. He read it twice then looked up at Griphook. "So, you're suggesting that I do this? Become betrothed at seventeen?"

Griphook shrugged. "It's not an uncommon age for humans, my Lord. And as I pointed out, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose so. If nothing else, she can probably help me better understand stuff in this world," he murmured. He also admitted that he knew little about the daughter in question. She was a Slytherin, but she had a different sort of reputation. He

also knew she was very attractive, so there was no problem on that level. The real question was, could he get along with her? Enough to spend his life with her?

That was the single most important question in his mind.

"Yes, there is that," agreed the Goblin.

Harry gave him one final look, then took a deep breath "Dobby?"

The elf appeared with a small pop. "You called me, Mister Harry?" Dobby stood proudly, dressed in a tunic and pants that clearly showed his family association.

The title of Mister was a compromise between them. The elf had insisted on being bonded to Harry and was at first confused when Harry told him about his name change. It took some explaining, but the elf finally understood why Harry had done so.

Harry nodded and handed him the note Griphook had prepared. "Would you please deliver this message to Lord Greengrass and wait for his reply?"

Dobby smiled up at Harry and took the note. He vanished with a soft pop.

Harry stood. If all went well, he'd need a new robe for his meeting. With that thought in mind, he thanked Griphook and turned to leave.

As the young man strode from the office, the Goblin chuckled to himself. He was finding the young Lord Black a surprisingly refreshing human.

Later that same day...

Harry stood nervously in the foyer of the modest manor house. The wealth of the Greengrass family was more modest than his own, but it was still apparent. While they were an old and long established family, the Greengrass family had fallen on hard times some two centuries ago and was only now beginning to return to it's former glory.

"Lord Black?" said a voice.

Harry turned around to see a middle aged, slightly graying man step into the room. Behind him stood three women: Daphne, her younger sister whose name he failed to remember, and what could only be Daphne's mother.

"Potter?" Daphne said, her eyes wide.

Lord Greengrass stopped in his tracks and glanced back at his daughter before turning back to Harry. "Potter? Harry Potter?" he asked, confused.

Harry shook his head. "No, sir. Harry Orion Black, the adopted son of Sirius Orion Black, Eighth Earl of Blackmoor and the Head of the Black family."

Lord Greengrass eyed him as if he were weighing a side of beef. His robes were impeccable and he wore the Black family crest above his right breast, as well as the Black signet ring on his right hand. There was no sign of any affiliation with the Potters on the boy at all. By rights, he should be wearing the Potter ring, but there was no sign of it.

He frowned slightly. The Potter family was renowned for being a light side family with an untarnished reputation. For the life of him he couldn't understand what could possibly make Dumbledore's golden boy reject his roots, and yet, here he was proclaiming himself to be a Black.

"It is an interesting tale that I am willing to share with you, if you'd allow it," Harry offered, reading the man's questioning look accurately.

Cicero Greengrass nodded and motioned Harry through a nearby doorway.

Entering what was obviously the family dining room, he sat down on a chair at the middle of the table and waited for the family to be seated.

Cicero motioned to the older woman. "My Lord, allow me to introduce my wife, Priscilla Greengrass. I'm sure you know my oldest daughter, Daphne, and my youngest daughter, Astoria."



Harry nodded to each in turn. "I know your daughters from school, sir, but I confess I do not know either of them well. As to my title, I would prefer it if you would just call me Harry. I have only been aware of my title for a short time, and to be honest, I am rather uncomfortable with it."

Cicero nodded noncommittally and Priscilla placed a hand over his. He looked at his wife and she turned to Harry. "I believe you said you had a tale for us Harry?" she asked softly.

Harry leaned back on his chair and nodded. "It all started when I was once again returned to my summer time prison by Albus Dumbledore..."

On the advice of Griphook, he had only superficially covered his childhood, instead he opted to describe the summer, with the Order restricting his movements, treating him like he was under house arrest. He talked about his fight with Voldemort and how he had killed numerous times that day, and then he dropped the bombshell about his parents.

Nearly three hours later, a hoarse Harry took a sip from a glass of water a house elf had brought him, then waited for a reaction. He had explained a number of key issues, including the fact that Voldemort was dead, and that his death was the cause behind the illness that had recently struck the pure blooded community.

He had met several times with a representative of the Department of Mysteries following his fight. It was during one of these meetings that he had been informed of the illness sweeping the Death Eaters.

In a way, unburdening himself to them had been a cathartic experience that gave him a sense of relief. Other than the man from the DoM and Gringotts, no one knew about Voldemort.

He waited and as he did, one of the Greengrass elves finally started to bring in the food for the much delayed dinner.

Finally, Cicero Greengrass looked at his wife, who nodded and smiled slightly at him. "Well, that was quite a tale you had to share with us, my Lord. And it explains a great many things," he said finally. As publisher of the Daily Prophet, news of the illness sweeping the

pure blood community had reached Greengrass, of course. Along with the news, however, had come a gag order from the office of the Minister of Magic.

"Indeed," added Priscilla. "If I were in your shoes, I don't think I would want to be known as a Potter, either."

Cicero poured Harry a drink and waved to the food on the table. "Come, you must be hungry, and we've delayed dinner long enough. We will talk business after the meal"

Harry nodded and glanced across the table to Daphne, who had been watching him all evening with a look of cold speculation. She frowned when their eyes met.

Dinner turned out to be a lighthearted affair, but each knew the important conversation had yet to begin. When the plates were finally cleared, Priscilla gave her youngest daughter a look and she quietly excused herself from the table.

Harry swallowed nervously.

"I am assuming that you are here because of the contract that exists between our two families," Cicero said once his youngest had left the room.

Harry glanced over at Daphne, who glared at him.

"I am and in a way I'm not," he replied carefully.

Cicero's expression hardened. "Oh?" he asked with a touch of anger.

Harry held up a hand placatingly. "Please don't misunderstand me. I mean no offense. You need to understand that I wasn't brought up as a wizard. My advisor suggested that I talk to you about the contract. He felt it would be in the best interests of both our families. But that isn't my only motive for coming here tonight."

Priscilla leaned forward on her chair and lightly gripped her wine glass. "What was your other motive then?"

Harry looked down at his own wine glass for a long moment, then he looked back up at Daphne's mother. "All my life, people have made

decisions that affected me and never once did anyone ask me what I wanted. I lived with people who despised my very existence and I put up with a meddling old fool who brought me almost as much misery as the late Lord Voldemort."

He paused and looked over at Daphne, making eye contact. "I came here tonight because I wanted to know what Daphne wanted. I have no intention of doing to someone else what I hate the most. I won't make that decision for her. And finally, I admit to being curious. Thanks to the house system at school, Daphne and I have had no interaction at all. If we are to be wed, wouldn't it make sense to first find out if we could be friends, and perhaps someday mean even more to each other?"

Daphne stared at Harry in utter shock. She had assumed he would insist on carrying out the contract. To find that he was interested in discovering her wishes on the matter was startling. She had been raised knowing that her own wishes were not important when compared to the needs of the family.

Priscilla leaned back on her chair and sipped her wine. Harry's words had given her a profound sense of relief. She knew that Cicero would not be pleased with his answer. As far as her husband was concerned, Daphne was a family asset to be used to advance the family's standing in society.

"As much as I've come to love my husband," Priscilla said, "it would have been nice to have been asked first."

Cicero seemed to deflate at his wife's comment. He had been prepared to give Daphne away. He could see the obvious value of aligning his family with the man who defeated the Dark Lord. But the last thing he wanted to do was put the decision into the hands of his oldest daughter.

"Then perhaps we should retire for the evening and allow these two young people the opportunity to get to know each other?" he finally said. The look his wife was giving him was explicit. She wanted the two youngsters to talk without their interference.

Daphne blinked at her father and Harry smiled, realizing that Cicero was venturing into uncharted waters for him. Just giving them some time alone so they could talk was breaking with tradition.

Cicero stood. "My Lord," he said, returning to the stiff formality that marked the opening of their meeting, "I would offer you the hospitality of our humble home for the night. I know you and my daughter must have much to discuss and I am certain you would not abuse our tenuous relationship."

Harry bowed slightly from his chair. Cicero's warning was clear: talk with Daphne and nothing more. "You have my word, my Lord, and I thank you for this opportunity, as well as for the lodgings for the night."

Lord Greengrass nodded and walked to the door, his wife a discreet two steps behind him.

At the door, she turned to face him. "Harry, I knew Sirius, both in school and before he attended Hogwarts. He always claimed that if he could have one goal in life it would be to restore the nobility to his family that it once held. The house of Black was not always known for its dark tendencies. I think that he would approve of your actions tonight."

Harry blushed and looked down at the table for a moment. Priscilla knew in that instant that despite the confident outward exterior, there was still a boy behind the mask looking for approval.

Priscilla shot Daphne one final look then turned and exited the room.

When they were alone, Daphne turned her gaze back to Harry. She eyed him coolly, her expression a blank mask. It was a mask she was used to wearing at school and had served her well in the past.

A heavy silence filled the room. He wasn't sure how to proceed.

"So what now, Potter? Don't think I'm just going to spread my legs for you, or your Gryffindor buddies. I convinced Draco to look elsewhere for entertainment and I can do the same for you," she said with a touch of anger.

Harry sighed and shook his head. This wasn't going the way he expected. "Daphne, you don't know me. Don't read Hogwarts house rivalries into my personality, or you'll be sadly mistaken. I wasn't lying when I said I wanted to know what you want."

She frowned uncertainly. "My desires aren't important, I've known since I was five that my father would pick my husband for me and that the man he chose would be good for our family. Besides, if your so concerned about choices, what about your choice? Don't yours matter, as well? I know most of the boys in the school lust after me. Wouldn't you like to be the one to bed me?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair nervously. "I will be the first to admit that I consider you stunningly beautiful, but beauty doesn't last forever. And outward beauty can hide the ugliest of people. I want to know whats on the inside."

She colored slightly from his compliment. She wasn't vain, but she did know she was attractive and had used that in the past to protect herself by pitting one boy against another.

"In a way, my very presence here tonight is signaling my choice, Daphne, but before I proceed, I need to know something. Are you as shallow as you appear to be at school or is there a person inside capable of love? You have to admit, you have cultivated a persona of aloofness. You make people think that emotions are beneath your dignity to express."

She stared at him, her eyes sparking with fury, but she held her tongue.

Harry watched her for a long moment and she said nothing. Finally, he shook his head. "I see," he said, sounding disappointed. Standing, he looked down at her. "Please convey my apologies to your father and mother for bothering you. I'll inform Gringotts that I intend to pass the contract down to a future generation. Your father will receive official notification from them."

He turned and made his way to the door.

"Potter," she said, "Potter... Harry... Please wait!"

He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "Yes?" he replied softly.

"What do you want from me?" she whispered. "If my father says so I'll go to your bed as a dutiful wife should. I'll even bear your children, as I should. I know the details of the contract. I will do whatever you

want me to do. But why are you asking what I want? My wishes don't count."

He leaned his forehead against the door. "I don't want a Narcissa Malfoy, Daphne. I don't want some bitter woman forced into marriage, who simply goes through the motions because it's her duty." he said in reply. He turned to face her and she was struck by how tired and old his eyes looked. "All my life I've been told what to do. I've been told I'm worthless, a freak, useless. I've even been called crazy and attention seeking. All I've ever wanted was someone who actually cared about me. Not about some nebulous duty, or obligation. If caring for someone is beyond your abilities, then we should stop this before it even begins."

He looked down at his feet for a moment while gathering his thoughts, then he looked up at her again. "Your mother loves your father, doesn't she? And he loves her?"

Daphne nodded, his question confused her.

"Is it wrong for me to want something similar? I don't want a dutiful wife. I want a willing partner. I had hoped that the contract that existed between our families would allow me to see if you could fill that role. But I won't force you into it, I refuse to let anyone force me to do anything and I refuse to put someone else in that position."

She stood and walked around the table to face him. His words struck a chord deep within her and while she didn't recognize it, a tiny crack appeared in her ice queen persona.

She reached for his hand and he looked at her in surprise. What he wants isn't all that bad, she mused. And there are some potions that I could take to help if love doesn't develop on its own. He really is very handsome, in a scruffy sort of way, and very powerful.

She locked gazes with him and suddenly felt out of her depth. She was a powerful witch, but looking into his eyes nearly took her breath. They burned brilliantly with a green fire and she could sense the power behind them.

"You really want me as a partner?" she asked, suddenly unsure of herself. Now that she was really experiencing Harry up close, she felt a bit intimidated by him.

He nodded. "I hope that we can be friends, and more," he replied softly.

Hogwarts, Headmaster's office, August 10th...

"Headmaster?"

Dumbledore looked up from his discussion with Minerva about the coming school year.

"Ah, Poppy. How fares Severus?" he asked.

The school matron frowned. "Not good, I'm afraid. Might I come through?"

He scowled at her comment and nodded unhappily. He had been sure she would figure out whatever was ailed the man and correct it. So far, however, nothing she did seemed to help.

The fireplace expanded and Poppy stepped through into the office. She brushed the soot from her shoulders and then moved to sit next to Minerva, who nodded amicably at her friend.

"Headmaster, this morning, in sheer desperation, I contacted St. Mungo's concerning Severus," she said to open the conversation.

Dumbledore's scowled deepened. He hadn't wanted news of the man's illness to leak out.

Poppy saw his expression and scowled back at him. "Headmaster, despite what you may believe, Severus' condition is not improving. In fact, he's getting worse, and nothing I've done has been able to stop his decline. At this rate, I give the man a month, two at the most, before he dies."

Minerva gasped and turned to Dumbledore. "You told me it wasn't serious! You said he'd be back to work any day now!"

The old man's scowl faded and he looked at his deputy apologetically. "It is what I hoped would happen, Minerva. Poppy has never failed us yet."

"Yeah, well, get ready for your first disappointment," Poppy muttered.

"What do you mean, Poppy?" asked Minerva, after giving Albus a glare.

"Healer Thompson told me to make him comfortable and forget about bringing him into St. Mungo's. They have three whole floors filled with people suffering the same illness. According to Healer Thompson, they haven't a bed to spare, or a single idea how to treat this illness, although they have found a common thread in the victims. Over two hundred people are ill."

Dumbledore shook off his shock and looked intently at the matron. "Oh? What is this common thread?" He was deeply surprised that he hadn't heard about this illness before, and that none of his Ministry contacts had found out about it. It was unusual for the Ministry to be able to keep a secret, especially on this scale.

"Every single one of them has the Dark Mark. And from what I learned from Healer Thompson, that includes most of our sixth and seventh year Slytherins and about half of our Slytherin fourth and fifth years, plus a scattering of others in the other houses. Except Hufflepuff, which seems to have avoided You-Know-Who's recruitment efforts entirely."

Minerva dropped her cup and it shattered on the stone floor. Poppy had just implied that there were Death Eater scum in her own house!

Poppy sighed and swished her wand, fixing Minerva's cup, then she levitated it to the desktop.

"How many?" Dumbledore stammered.

She looked at him in confusion. "Sir?"

"How many are ill?"

"I'm not sure of the precise numbers, Headmaster. You will recall that most Death Eaters tend to avoid Healers unless they kidnap them first. But Healer Thompson said they are aware of 27 boys and 18 girls who are ill. Are there others who have not gone to the hospital? Most likely, yes."



"Albus," Minerva said worriedly, "so many children!"

"Yes, yes, I fear that we have not been as successful in preventing students from taking the Mark as I had hoped," he replied solemnly. He turned his attention back to Poppy.

"Is there any word from the Ministry about this illness? The Department of Mysteries perhaps might have some clue as to treating this ailment."

He trailed off and stared at Poppy as she shook her head.

"Healer Thompson said it was the Ministry that told them to make them comfortable as possible and wait for the end. He went on to point out something I had overlooked. It seems that their magic is draining away. That's why death is inevitable. When I checked Severus after talking to Healer Thompson I discovered he was right. Severus had a Magical Index rating of 842 when he had his entry physical just prior to joining the staff. Today he had a Magical Index of 517, nearly half of his magic had bled off. As you know, once it drops below 50 we'll be unable to use any magical methods to treat him. We rely on the patient's own magic to help in the healing process. Once he hits that threshold, he'll die within days."

"Can't you do something?" exclaimed Dumbledore angrily.

"What would you have me do?" Poppy snapped back. "I can't place him in stasis with his magic draining away. Stasis is useless when dealing with core problems and everyone from St. Mungo's to the Ministry thinks this is a core problem brought on by something Voldemort did by accident to the Dark Mark."

"Why isn't the Ministry doing anything about this?" protested Minerva.

Poppy turned to look at her. "What would you have them do? From what I've been told, Minister Fudge has practically gone into hiding. He's afraid that Voldemort has developed a disease and will use it on everyone. They can't find Voldemort to make him fix it. They can't even find him to arrest him! Expecting the Ministry to do anything useful is unrealistic, Minerva. You of all people should know better, or should I remind you of the year you stuck your head in the sand and allowed your students to be tortured by Umbridge?"

Minerva flushed, well aware of her own failure to protect her charges.

"Ladies, please," Dumbledore said in a conciliatory tone. He didn't need them fighting over that year right now. He turned his full attention to Poppy. "Isn't there something you can do?"

Poppy seemed to deflate. She looked at him for a long moment then finally shook her head. "I've tried everything I can think of, Headmaster. All I can do at this point is make Severus comfortable and pray that someone smarter than me comes up with an answer. If I had to make a guess, Severus has until mid September. I would suggest you find another Defense professor to take his place. Even if by some miracle he survives this ailment, he would still need months of rest to recover."

Dumbledore removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I will contact the Prophet about placing an ad for the position. Severus has served this school and the fight against Voldemort admirably for many years. Please see that he's as comfortable as possible."

Poppy nodded. "I will do that, Headmaster," she replied, then stood and left the office via his floo.

He watched her go for a moment, then turned back to Minerva. "Would you contact Healer Thompson and ask him if they can supply a list of names of the students who are ill? We need to get a feel for how many students will be missing this year and what their absence will do to our budgets."

Minerva nodded and left the office.

Alone, Dumbledore sighed and glanced over at his familiar. Fawkes had been rather standoffish of late and that confused him. It never occurred to him that it was possible for the bond between them to weaken as he strayed away from the light.

So many students. This can't be good, he thought. And the loss of Severus will be hard to fix. Perhaps the Malfoy boy could be persuaded to take his place? He grimaced. That is if the lad hasn't already taken the Mark.

The Lincolnshire Cottage, August 15th...

The wave of magic pulsed through the building. James and Lily had just enough time to look up in consternation before both were forcefully thrown through open windows. It was debatable who had the easier landing: James, who had been thrown through a second story window, or Lily who landed in her carefully maintained rose bushes.

James painfully climbed to his feet and took stock of himself. His shirt was torn and he was bleeding from a cut on his forehead. Hearing a low moan, he looked around wildly for his wife.

The rose bushes shook and he rushed over to her side, helping her stand. She looked like someone had dragged her over coarse sandpaper, thanks to the thorns.

"Noggin!" James snapped, summoning the Potter elf that had been with them for the past sixteen years.

He frowned when the little elf failed to appear. Confused, he turned just in time to see the cottage shimmer and fade from view.

"James, what's going on?" Lily asked with a tremor in her voice.

He stared at the spot where the house once stood. "I don't know, Lils, but I think we best get to Dumbledore. He'll know what to do about this."

Lily nodded and gestured with her wand, fixing the tear in her husband's shirt. "I hope so," she murmured.

The couple apparated away a moment later.

As soon as they were gone, another couple appeared. Harry folded his invisibility cloak and placed it in a pocket, then he looked at Daphne.

She smiled at him. "I told you the elf would be the key to finding them."

He nodded, "You were right, and Gringotts was a perfect way to contact him. I'm surprised they only made the place unplottable.

Then again, they do have a history of problems with the Fidelius charm."

Daphne grinned and moved a little closer to him.

"Noggin!" Harry called.

The elf appeared and looked up at him. "Yes, Master Harry?"

He smiled down at the little creature. It surprised Daphne greatly that he treated his elves with such kindness. It also reaffirmed that she had made the right choice when she told her father to go ahead and sign the contract. She had no doubt in her mind that Harry would be a gentle husband and even if she didn't realize it, the cracks in her ice queen persona were growing daily.

"Thank you for your help, Noggin," he said softly. "Now, I'd like you to return to the manor house and tell Dobby that you will be helping him put the manor in order. Dobby is in charge of the renovations, so he'll know where you can work."

Noggin nodded happily and vanished with a pop.

The manor they were renovating used to belong to the Black family but it hadn't been maintained in many years and was in need of a number of repairs. He and Daphne had toured the manor yesterday and she had made a number of suggestions concerning fixing the place so it was habitable. Harry finally cornered her on the stairway and asked if she would like to live there. She had given him a slight smile and a nod after a moment's hesitation.

It would make a fine home, once it was repaired and decorated.

Daphne looked at the cottage critically. Because she was now officially betrothed to Harry, she could see past the Black family magics he had used to hide the building. "It's not much, is it?" she said with a sniff. Clearly the Potters had been trying very hard not to raise anyone's suspicion by living as modestly as possible.

Noggin had been key to locating the home, but once they had the address, they were able to discover plenty about the residents, including the fact that they had been receiving the Daily Prophet for nearly sixteen years. They knew every time the Prophet wrote

anything about Harry. They knew about Sirius, and about his escape. It only confirmed in Harry's mind that the Potters were no more relatives than the Dursleys. He would never consider them family.

Harry glanced up at the building and shook his head. The cottage reminded him of Privet Drive in its exacting neatness. Despite what he had been told, at least from the outside it looked like Lily and Petunia might not be all that different. "No, it isn't. I'll talk to Griphook about leasing it out to another family or selling it outright."

She nodded. He was selling off most of the Potter properties. What he couldn't easily sell, he offered to Gringotts at a substantial discount just to divest himself of the property. A few properties, like the Florida beach apartment, were given to the Black family in a simple paper transfer of ownership.

The only place so far that belonged to the Black family that he was planning on selling was Grimmauld Place, and that property wouldn't go up on the market until he had first evicted the squatters currently occupying it. If all had gone to plan, Gringotts was already hard at work, breaking down the Fidelius and other wards on that dump.

The squatters were learning today that they no longer had a place to meet.

He couldn't reveal the location to Gringotts, but even Griphook had a laugh when Harry told them to look between number 11 and number 13 Grimmauld Place. It was a basic flaw of the Fidelius charm.

"So, what's next?" she asked.

He looked down at the ground for a moment, then he smiled. "We don't have anything in particular that needs to be done for another few days, not until our appointment with the Unspeakables. How about we spend the weekend in Paris? I've always wanted to see that city. We'll go muggle. It will be fun!"

She blinked and smiled softly at him, then moved closer, sliding her hand into his. "Just the two of us?"

He returned her smile. As much as he appreciated some of the girls in his life, there was something special about Daphne. "I'll drop your parents an owl telling them where we are. This will give us a chance

to avoid the storm we unleashed today. Besides, we're both of adult age now and even I can take your Mum's hints."

Daphne blushed and it was her turn to look down. Harry had quickly formed a cordial relationship with her mother and she had made it plain to everyone that she approved of him totally. To Daphne's embarrassment, she had even hinted that she wouldn't be upset if he spent the night in her daughter's bed. Harry's only reaction to her mother's comment was to say that when the time was right, Daphne would invite him into her bed.

"Changed your mind have you?" she asked. She was unsure if this excited her or scared her. The idea of losing her virginity was something she was coming to accept, but Harry had told her that it would only happen when she wanted it to happen.

He smiled at her and shook his head. "Hardly. If you want, we'll wait until our wedding night. I was just saying that even I caught onto your Mum's hints."

While she felt a great sense of relief, the last week and a half had caused her to totally reevaluate her opinion of Harry. She was certain that the time would come when she'd willingly invite him into her bed, but just not yet.

She lifted her chin and looked at him with a touch of defiance. She wanted him to understand that while this may be inevitable, she was still her own person. "So, you're in no rush to sample the goods?"

He turned and slipped an arm around her waist then pulled her closer. His eyes bore into hers. "What did I tell you?" he asked intently. His face was only inches from hers and she stared up into his eyes which seemed to boil with a restrained intensity.

"That you wanted a partner," she whispered back.

"Can you be that partner?"

He pulled her a little tighter against his body and she bit back the urge to moan against his chest. She could feel his desire pressing up against her.

"I want to be," she replied, still whispering. "I know this is unusual for me, but I want to be your partner."

He leaned forward slightly and kissed her forehead gently. "Then you know how much I want you," he said. "When you're ready, I'll be ready."

She wrapped her arms around him and nodded. "Take me to Paris, Harry. Let's have the weekend to ourselves."

She wasn't ready yet, but she would be soon. It didn't matter anymore that her father wanted this marriage to happen. What mattered was the man holding her wanted her as his equal and she knew deep down that no one her father picked would have done that for her.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Twenty minutes after leaving the cottage, the Potters were standing in front of the door to Dumbledore's office.

"Come!" called a voice angrily.

James gave Lily a glance and she shrugged. She had no idea why their friend and mentor would be angry, but she was sure he wasn't angry with them.

Dumbledore looked up when the Potters pushed the door open and entered his office. His expression changed to alarm. They would have never shown up at the school unless it was an emergency.

"What's happened? You wouldn't be here unless it was important," he asked uneasily, he had already been dealt one shock today.

"We were thrown out of the cottage, and Noggin refuses to answer our calls," James explained.

"What could have happened to him and our home?" asked Lily plaintively. "It just vanished before our very eyes."

Dumbledore sighed. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to hear you say that. I'm afraid the worst possible thing has happened," he said

quietly, then he slid his copy of the Daily Prophet across the desk towards them.

James gasped and Lily staggered back a step.

With a shaking hand, James reached for the newspaper.

Parents of the Boy-Who-Lived are alive!

Harry Potter abandoned as a toddler by cowardly parents!

In a stunning announcement today, Gringotts broke its long held silence about the Potter family and stated quite firmly that the Potter will never be activated. A Gringotts spokesperson went on to explain that this type of magical will automatically activate upon the death of the filer. And since it never activated, Gringotts has no choice but to assume that the adult Potters are still alive and in hiding somewhere within the British Isles.

When asked about Harry Potter, the Gringotts spokesperson read from two prepared statements. He said, "At the time of the Potter's deaths, Gringotts had doubts, but we were rebuffed when we requested an independent examination of the bodies. By law, and since we are obligated by treaty to follow the wishes of the Ministry, we acknowledged their claim that James and Lily Potter were dead and placed Harry Potter in the role of Head of the family. The rite of ascension was successfully completed for Mr. Potter the day following his coming of age.

"Should James Potter walk into the bank today and demand access to the Potter accounts, we would not be able to oblige him. Legally, the man is dead and has no claim to anything of the Potters. His son, Harry Potter, has taken up the mantle of the Head of his family and control of the family fortune. When we informed Mr. Potter of his parent's survival, he offered the following statement to be read when we made this announcement."

"The news of my parents being alive came as no particular shock to me, considering my life. I can't say the fact that my own parents betrayed me is a surprise. That they would resort to such a cowardly act makes me doubt the entire story about that Halloween night so many years ago. At this point, I have had no contact with them and have no wish to ever have any contact with them.



"I would appreciate the press respecting my privacy on this matter. Furthermore I will say that since it is now apparent that my birth parents are still alive, there is no such thing as the Boy-Who-Lived. It is obviously a lie made up by cowards and those willing to criminally deceive the wizarding public.

"I call on the Ministry of Magic to investigate their disappearance, as well the illegal incarceration of Lord Sirius Orion Black, the Earl of Blackmoor, who was accused and sent to jail without a trial, for a betrayal that never happened."

DMLE Director Amelia Bones said her department has been contacted by Gringotts and they are planning to open an investigation into the actions of the adult Potters.

Meanwhile, numerous families stepped forward to offer Harry Potter lodging. Both Gringotts and the DMLE have pointed out that Mr. Potter reached his age of majority only a few short weeks ago and is capable of taking care of his own needs. Currently, the whereabouts of Harry Potter and his parents are unknown.

Attempts to contact Albus Dumbledore were rebuffed by a protected floo access.

The Potter Family - How could such a light oriented family fall so far? Page 3.

Halloween Night, 1981 - An objective look at the myth and the known facts. Page 4

James placed the paper back down on the desk and helped steady his wife. Taking her hand, he lead her to a chair in front of the Headmaster's desk. Once she was seated, he fell into the chair next to her and closed his eyes, unsure of what to do next.

She reached for the paper with a shaking hand. Reading the story, her complexion paled further.

"He knows. Lord help us, James, he knows," she whispered, then looked to her husband. They had always believed that at some point they would be reunited after the situation had been explained to Harry and he'd welcome them with open arms.

James looked at Dumbledore. "You'll have to explain this to him. I know it's earlier than we planned, but there's no help for it now."

Dumbledore took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. Harry has left the Dursleys. They haven't seen him in at least two weeks. My watchers found an illusion taking his place. I alerted his friends and all of them have written to him. Unfortunately, the owls returned their letters unopened. I have no idea where young Harry might be.

"I've been informed by Gringotts that we are to vacate Headquarters immediately. I visited Gringotts this morning, hoping to straighten them out. While I was there they told me that certain accounts that you had previously granted me access to have been closed by the account owner."

James sagged back in his chair and deflated. "He's going to ruin everything!" he muttered.

"No," Lily said firmly. "He wouldn't. He's still a Potter, no matter what. He won't abandon the light side. I believe that. We just have to get to a point where we can talk to him."

Dumbledore's brow furrowed in thought. "Perhaps when school starts. Currently, we have more pressing concerns. The cat is out of the bag, as the muggles say. We must bring you both forward and explain to the media what caused your actions on that night. Fortunately, I can use you both here on the staff, so consider yourselves hired. James, you will fill in for Severus as the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. Lily, you will take Potions."

The two Potters nodded, reassured by the older wizard's words. Dumbledore would fix things. He always did.

Ministry of Magic, August 18th...

The crowd in the atrium was an unhappy one, almost angry with the people facing them up on the platform. It had been only a few days since the announcement that the Potters were alive, and during that time the press had crucified them mercilessly. Now the Ministry atrium was filled with casual passers-by and reporters who were out for blood. The story hinted at so far left the press doubting some of

the their top leaders. After all, no one liked to watch their myths destroyed before their eyes.

Thus far, the only person to come out of the situation looking good was Harry Potter, who was portrayed as a victim.

Dumbledore frowned. His plan for announcing the return of the Potters was not being as universally well received as he had hoped. He had coaxed Cornelius out of hiding and convinced him to attend a joint press conference with the Potters. But even the presence of the Minister didn't dim the hostile attitude of the crowd.

Dumbledore stood on the platform, along with Minister Fudge, and explained that the Potters had gone undercover to assist against the war with Voldemort. He told the crowd about their attempts to infiltrate the Death Eater organization and their continued attempts to find Death Eaters who had escaped after the fall of Voldemort.

He then tried to explain that Voldemort had in fact attacked the Potters. His tale was received coldly by the crowd, and it got worse when the Potters appeared.

As soon as James and Lily ventured onto the stage, they were met with a momentary hostile silence, then the questions started.

"Mrs. Potter, why did you abandon your fifteen month old son?" shouted one reporter.

"Mr. Potter, what do you have to show for your efforts? Have you brought any escaped Death Eaters to justice?" shouted another.

"Were you aware of the numerous attempts on your son's life while attending school? And what have you done to make it easier for him?" asked one snide reporter from the Daily Prophet.

"Why didn't you step forward when the Earl of Blackmoor was sent to prison for betraying you?" shouted someone from Witch Weekly.

"What do you think about the fact that your own son calls you two cowards and wants nothing to do with you?" shouted another reporter.

James and Lily huddled together on the stage, practically flinching under the onslaught until Dumbledore stood from his seat and walked over to them.

"Please!" he said. "Ladies and gentlemen! The Potters have sacrificed everything they cared for in order to help make our world a safer place. Now that they are no longer working undercover, I have hired them on to assume roles as part of the Hogwarts staff, where I have no doubt, that they will be able to pass their considerable knowledge to the students."

The reporters in the crowd settled down into a sullen silence. They knew that the Potters were being protected and there was little they could do with both the Ministry and Dumbledore providing that protection. That meant that they could only turn to the court of public opinion to voice their outrage.

Harry and Daphne watched from the back of the crowd. It hadn't been their intention to attend Dumbledore's press conference, but they were early for their appointment and had stopped to witness the spectacle first hand. The person they were set to meet with had given each of them a bracelet that provided a glamour that made them unrecognizable.

"So, they're your parents," she murmured.

"Apparently," he replied coldly.

She reached out and touched his cheek. The pair had been spending an incredible amount of time together of late and she was coming to understand a little of what made Harry Black tick. Beyond all of Dumbledore's manipulations, beyond all of the pain Voldemort had inflicted on him, beyond all of that, his parents abandonment hurt him the most.

He smiled at her touch. It was a new sensation to him and he was learning to crave it. Turning slightly, he nodded towards the lifts. "Come on, love. Let's go see the man about our future," he said softly.

She blushed and smiled to herself before following him. He had taken to using small terms of endearment when they were alone and it still caught her by surprise.

Their appointment was with the Unspeakable who had taken control of the battlefield. When he contacted Harry via owl asking this meeting, Harry had replied, asking if it were all right to bring his betrothed along. They were both surprised when he got a reply extending an invitation to Daphne, as well.

It would come as a shock to them both when they learned that the Department of Mysteries actually preferred married couples.

Greengrass Manor, later that same day...

"So, they offered you both jobs?" exclaimed Cicero.

"In time, yes." Harry replied. "They wanted me because I seem to have more power than I should have. The prophecy stated I had to kill Voldemort, but it also said I would be his equal in power. It's well known that the Dark Lord augmented his power with rituals, where mine seems to be natural and they feel that was worth extending an offer. Daphne got her offer based on her grades and her interests. I think they also wanted to see our commitment to each other for themselves before they tendered the offer to pickup the rest of our schooling."

Daphne smiled. She knew deep down that Harry had opened the door for her, but it had been her own intelligence and abilities that resulted in an offer from the Department of Mysteries. Daphne Greengrass got the job, not Daphne Black, riding on the coattails of her famous, soon to be husband. Her. That she expected her name to change to Daphne Black before the year ended was merely icing on the cake.

"What will you be doing then?" asked Priscilla her daughter.

"We'll spend the next two years attending the Advanced Institute of Sorcery in Salem, studying wards, ward analysis and spell creation. The Americans don't have a N.E.W.T. exam like we do. Our existing grades and O. were good enough to allow the Department to enroll us into a mastery program they fund.

"Harry will also be given private instruction on ward and curse breaking, as well as dueling," she replied, excited at the prospect. She'd never expected an opportunity like this. "After that, we'll return

to Britain and begin work for the Department. They also felt that another voice on the Wizengamot would be an additional advantage. Apparently they have several employees who also have seats on the Wizengamot. Once Harry is invested, he'll be able to take up his seat."

Harry smiled at her reaction, though he was somewhat confused by it. Having been raised among muggles, he never realized that Daphne had been raised to expect that she would be a dutiful wife of a pure blood husband and raise their children. A career, which seemed so obvious to Harry, had been only a distant fantasy to Daphne until today.

"What about family?" asked Cicero. It had been an issue that had been bothering him since the couple had returned from their meeting at the Ministry.

Harry leaned back in his chair and glanced at Daphne, who was now blushing and looking down at her plate. "We're only seventeen," he replied. "My parents had me when they were very young - barely two years out of Hogwarts - and frankly, I don't think that's a role model I want to follow. No, I'd rather we wait a few years before starting a family."

Daphne shot him a hopeful look.

Harry paused and sipped from his goblet. "I think it would be all right to wait until we're in our mid 20's before starting a family. This would give us each time to begin our careers and we'd still have plenty of time for children. As much as I'd like a family, I think that I need to learn how to be a husband first."

Priscilla smiled, inordinately pleased at his comment.

Cicero nodded and felt a little relieved. For a brief moment he had suspected that Harry's upbringing and his parents abandonment had resulted in him not wanting a family.

"How many children do you want?" asked Priscilla curiously.

Harry shot a look at Daphne, who was looking at him with interest now. He grinned. "Well, I recall the quack Dumbledore has teaching Divination predicting I'll have an even dozen, and be Minister

someday. Personally, I think that's overdoing it. While I may like the Weasley family, I have no desire to use them as a role model, either. No, I'd be happy with a boy and a girl, but if we have more, as long as they're healthy and happy, I'll be pleased. I also realize that giving birth would be a great strain on Daphne and I have no wish to see her go through that a dozen times."

Daphne released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. His mention of the Weasley's had her worried for a moment.

"I know we haven't discussed the marriage contract in detail but if you do end up having a second son, do you think it would be possible to allow him to use the Greengrass name?" Cicero asked. He looked a bit apologetic. "It's something I intend to ask of Astoria's husband, as well, when the time comes."

Harry leaned back on his chair and reached for his drink. He played with the goblet for a moment, then looked at Daphne's father. "I can't promise we'll have a second son, but if we do, I would not be opposed to him being a Black-Greengrass."

He glanced over at Daphne, who nodded. Three children might be unusual by magical standards, but even her own parents had two. She could easily see three children in their future, and she hoped they had Harry's intense green eyes.

Cicero smiled softly. He could see what Harry was trying to do by keeping the name Black in the mix, and at the same time allowing for the continuation of the Greengrass line. Since he had mentioned Astoria, he knew that Harry was allowing for the name use until he selected an heir from his grandchildren. If he chose Astoria's child, Harry's son would be able to drop the Greengrass portion of his name.

He nodded his thanks, then looked at his daughter and raised his glass to her with a smile. This was probably the last potential sticking point for him and he was signaling to his daughter that the last hurdle was past.

In some ways, he felt Harry was too lenient with his daughter. He had raised her with a firm hand, knowing that her life may be hard once she married. But seeing them together had caused him to reevaluate his thoughts on the matter. Daphne's attitude over the

past weeks had radically altered. She smiled and laughed more often and he found he liked that. He liked the idea of knowing his daughter was happy.

He was coming to believe that Harry's concern for her happiness would allow them to eventually fall in love. Though that had never before been a consideration when he thought of finding husbands for his children, he realized now that it should have been. His own marriage was proof that, when genuine affection between spouses was present, the marriage was stronger and better able to weather the rough patches that cropped up in all relationships.

It had taken Cicero several years of marriage before he realized he loved Priscilla. Strangely, it never occurred to him that Daphne was already falling in love with Harry and he with her. Had someone told him so, he would have been surprised by it.

Daphne's mother, Priscilla, suspected that the pair was falling in love and was especially happy for her daughter. It was the primary reason why she exerted as much control as she could to moderate her husband's responses to this situation.

Standing, Cicero held out his hand to Priscilla. When she took it and stood up, they both smiled at the younger couple and quietly left the room.

Harry and Daphne watched them leave in silence. A moment later, an elf appeared and placed some coffee on the table for them.

Daphne leaned forward and poured a cup for each of them. She handed one to Harry and gave him a truly warm smile. "I have to admit, I find myself shocked by these events. If someone told me I'd be sitting here today with Harry Potter, and that I'd have a future with him that included children and a career, I would have laughed in their face."

She paused for a moment. "Harry Black, I mean. And the more I think on it, the more I think the change suits you."

"I guess, I can see that," he replied after a moments silence. "What with you being in Slytherin and all."



She toyed with her cup for a moment, then looked at him. "I don't think you fully understand, Harry. This had nothing to do with me being in Slytherin and you being in Gryffindor. It's about what I was raised to do. I am a Greengrass female, raised to be a dutiful wife who, like my mother, would attempt to establish some measure of control over my husband through sex. I was raised to bear children for the benefit of my husband and my family. I had hoped that my husband would be someone I could at least like, but I had no control over that."

She paused and sipped her coffee.

He knew she wasn't finished and he watched her carefully, considering her words.

"You arrived here only a short time ago and broke traditions left and right. My poor father was caught totally by surprise because you gave him reasons to break with those traditions that made sense."

He raised an eyebrow at her comment and she lifted her chin defiantly. "You still don't get it do you? Harry, you barge into my life like a storm, blowing all my expectations out the window. I can't help but look at you and think 'What powerful children we'll have.' Or that, with your wealth and mine, we could be a political powerhouse that would make the Malfoy's look like children. My father knows it. Combined, we will be a force to reckon with politically, financially and magically. And despite all that, you've had one overwhelming concern. That I was not forced into this relationship.

"Instead of dictating your desires and issuing orders, you really want to know what I want. My mother says that my father thinks you're being too easy on me, and yet I can't help but feel that she wishes my father had taken a similar approach with her."

She shivered under his gaze and plowed on. "You want me to be someone, not just a wife and a source of children. And the more time we spend together, the more I want to give you those things. I want to be your partner, and the mother of your children. I've seen you a few times when you're feeling especially moved by something and you glow. Your eyes shine with a power and passion and I find myself wanting you to look at me like that."

"A lifetime together," he murmured.

She blinked and looked at him closely. "I'm sorry?"

He smiled and looked up. "A lifetime together. That's what we'll have, Daphne. Can you imagine what life would be like going through it with someone you hate? Or perhaps just don't like? I wasn't kidding when I said I wanted a partner. I wasn't raised in this world and there is much that I don't understand about it. One of your jobs will be to help me learn, just like I will help you learn about the muggle world."

She nodded thoughtfully. Their trip to Paris had been a perfect example of what he was talking about. He had checked them into a two bedroom suite at a fancy muggle hotel. Then they had spent the weekend exploring Paris like a pair of muggles. It had been an eye opening and somewhat humbling experience for the daughter of a pure blood family.

The sheer mass of muggles and their abilities nearly overwhelmed her. Since then, Harry had introduced her to the cinema in London and she had gotten an eyeful of what muggles were capable of. From a wizarding perspective it was surprising to discover that wizards weren't as superior as she thought they were.

She leaned back on her chair. He had everything her family could hope for; wealth, position, and incredible power. But more to the point, he had a certain nobility and caring attitude that touched her and warmed her soul. She instinctively knew he would not treat his children with the aloofness her father had used on her.

During their entire weekend together, other than kissing, he had not pushed for any more intimate contact, despite being given permission by her parents. He refused to apply any pressure on her and she greatly appreciated that fact.

"So, what about your parents?" she asked.

He blinked at the sudden change of topic and frowned slightly. "I don't know. Do you have an idea?"

She smiled broadly at him. It was an example of how he was different from the rest of the wizards she knew. "I do. We don't have

to be at school until September 5th. If we wanted to, we could use the welcoming feast to make a very public statement."

He leaned back and thought about that for a moment. "It could work, but we better make sure we're ready to hit the old man with all the necessary paperwork before we do that."

"I'll ask Dobby to go pick up the paperwork from the Ministry in the morning," she replied.

He nodded agreeably, then decided to change the subject back to something more important than cowardly parents.

"Gringotts found us a nice cozy place within walking distance of the Academy, but are you sure about this? I mean, the school does have housing for students."

She put her coffee down and stood up, then walked around the table. Pulling out a chair next to him she sat and leaned closer. "Yes, they do, in separate dormitories. We're going to be married in only a few short months. The past few weeks have been very nice and we've been together most of that time. Now I want us to be together more."

She stood and took her hand in his, tugging him a little closer. "Starting tonight," she whispered.

He stood at her urging and looked down at her. "So, controlling me with sex?"

She stared at him haughtily. "Mr. Black, I am from a very long line of witches who have studied extensively the magics of sex. My own grandmother wrote the definitive book on the subject and I learned at her knee. Trust me when I tell you that while I might be a virgin, I know ways of pleasuring you that you have never imagined. I might not be ready to give that up just yet, but that still leaves a lot of ground we can cover." Then she smiled at him.

Harry gulped nervously and nodded

Her smile became a grin. His own innocence was very endearing to her. She never knew it, but at that moment, the last vestiges of the Ice Queen of Slytherin House evaporated. She wouldn't need a potion to fall in love with Harry Black.

Greengrass Manor, August 31st...

Priscilla and Cicero looked up as Daphne stumbled sleepily into the dining room.

"Long night, dear?" asked her mother, a bit smugly.

Daphne shot her a look, then shook her head. "Yes, but not in the way you are implying, mother. My betrothed and I share a bed, but have not quite reached that stage yet. And that is despite your blatant invitation that Harry take me to bed."

Cicero blinked and stared at his daughter in surprise. He had assumed that silencing charms were the only reason why her bedroom was so quiet at night.

Priscilla shook her head. "I'm sorry, Daphne. I wasn't trying to be snide," she murmured.

"So why did you have trouble sleeping?" asked her father bluntly.

Daphne sat thoughtfully for a moment then made her decision. "He hasn't spoken much of his childhood to me, but from what he's said, and from his nightmares, I can tell he didn't have a good one. Malfoy's elves have been treated better than he was by his muggle relatives."

Cicero and Priscilla scowled. It was a Greengrass axiom: Family first and always.

"How bad was it?" asked Cicero.

"Bad enough that I can't let this go," Daphne replied. Her outward demeanor was calm, appearing to be almost indifferent. In truth, she was seething and only her upbringing was allowing her to appear so unmoved.

She had learned enough last night when he mumbled through a series of nightmares to make her want to put his former family under the Cruciatus curse.

"No. As much as you might want to do something, you shouldn't. You and Harry will be starting a new school soon and a new life together. It's best that you do so with a clean slate," Cicero said firmly. "Your mother and I will deal with this. Harry might have different ideas than what I was raised with, but I've come to see the value in some of them. He is family, or soon will be."

Daphne smiled thinly. She knew her father would be discrete and vicious. The Dursleys were about to run into a string of bad luck that no one could protect them from. It startled her slightly to realize that she had gone from thinking about "Harry Black" to thinking about "My Harry". They had hurt her Harry and would have to pay. Harry might be too noble to sink to revenge, but no one messed with her family.

Priscilla smiled at her daughter warmly. She was extremely pleased with the way things were turning out. Daphne had a mate who truly cared for her, beyond what she could bring to the marriage. Cicero's attitudes had been tweaked by Harry in a very good way. That meant that Astoria might also have the opportunity to find love, rather than a cold contract. Yes, she mused, the last month had been full of good surprises.

Hogwarts Faculty Quarters, September 1st...

Lily paced nervously in the small quarters she shared with James. They were a far cry from the home they had spent the last sixteen years of their lives hiding out in. She did feel a little better about things. Albus had floated them a small loan to allow them to buy some clothes and necessities that they had lost when they were thrown from their home.

"Nervous?" asked James. He leaned back on a loveseat that had seen better days.

She turned and faced him. "Aren't you? We're going to be seeing our son for the first time in years, and according to the paper, he hates us!"

James scowled and waved a hand dismissing her comment. "That was the shock and Gringotts coaching him. Like Albus said, once we can get him aside to talk to him, everything will be just fine. I know it."

Lily smiled at her husband's confidence, then changed the topic. "Poppy spoke to me about Severus and his condition, but I'm afraid there isn't anything I could think of that she hadn't already considered."

The reception the Potters had received from the staff had been mixed, at best. Some, like Minerva, refused to even speak with them unless it was on school business, while others didn't seem to care one way or another.

James frowned. He despised Severus and was privately happy to hear he was dying. He knew that Snape and Lily had once been close and that Snape had loved her, even if she only thought of him as a friend.

"It's a shame that we'll lose that source of information," he said carefully, "but we'll make do. Albus even mentioned that perhaps we could start doing more for the war effort again," he added proudly.

She eyed him for a moment before resuming her pacing. They hoped that Albus would be able to call Harry up to his office after the feast and they could get this mess straightened out.

James watched his wife for a moment longer, then he picked up a book on Defense. He found it tough to follow because of a growing knot in his belly. He was worried that things weren't going as they had planned and could only hope that between the three of them, they could make Harry understand.

Another reason to worry was Voldemort. The Dark Lord had been strangely quiet for the past month, but Dumbledore blamed that on the illness sweeping his Death Eaters. The Headmaster felt that, in all likelihood, Voldemort was too busy struggling with the problem and trying to find a solution for it.

James turned the page to the chapter on advanced shields and continued to struggle with the book and the worries he carefully hid from Lily.

Hogwarts Express, September 1st...

Harry sat in the compartment alone. Daphne had gone in search of several friends that she needed to talk to, explaining the situation between Harry and herself. Harry told her he'd let her have enough time to talk to her friends before he'd come to find her. He knew he'd need the time to have words with his 'friends'.

Strangely enough, he found himself keenly missing her presence. She had an extremely practical side that she showed to the world, but privately she was a passionate presence in his life and he missed that.

Their love life hadn't reached a full consummation yet, but they were sleeping together and taking great pleasure in exploring the physical aspects of their relationship. Daphne was right, she was very knowledgeable about magics involving sex, and was delighted to discover that Harry was an eager student.

He had given her a ring from the Black family vaults, and then bought one for himself. He told her that if she was going to wear his ring to signify her commitment to him, he would wear one to show his commitment to her. It was another example of the equality he wanted in their relationship.

As expected, the compartment door slid open and Hermione, Ron and Ginny entered. He looked up from the book he was reading, then, to their surprise, turned his attention back to his book.

"Harry," Hermione said tentatively, "where have you been for the last month?"

Dumbledore had imposed a communication blackout on Harry, and until he left the Dursleys, most of his friends had followed that order. It wasn't until he vanished from Privet Drive that they all tried to contact him. All of their letters were returned, undelivered.

"Out," he said simply and continued to attempt to read.

"But, Harry, Dumbledore said..."

Harry closed the book with a loud snap and glared at her. "I find it interesting that my so called friends ignored me for the first half of the summer, and only when I leave the Dursleys do you bother to try to contact me. On Dumbledore's orders both times, no doubt."

"But, mate, he told us..." Ron stammered. Harry's harsh attitude confused him.

"Shut it, Weasley. You three have shown your true colors this summer. I should have expected you three to pull another fifth year on me, but instead I found myself surprised and hurt by your betrayal. I know full well who wrote me before and after I left Surrey. No surprise, it wasn't any of you."

Seeing their shocked faces, he sneered. "Tell me, Weasley, were you paid to find me on the train that first year? Were any of you truly my friends? Obviously Dumbledore's orders mean more to you than our friendship did."

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione.

He shot her a glare, then stood up and turned to leave.

The door to the compartment opened again and Neville and Luna stood in the doorway, holding hands. Their smiles slipped as they sensed the tension in the room.

Luna looked at Harry and her eyebrow arched for a moment, then she smiled and performed a small curtsy. "My lord," she murmured.

Harry smiled at the girl and nodded to Neville. "Lord Longbottom, it is good to see you," he said in way of greeting.

Surprised, Neville nodded in reply and wondered who has started to instruct Harry in proper pure blood protocols. It shocked him to think that Harry could want close ties with the Longbottom family. It was only in the past two years that he had grown closer to Harry.

Harry turned to the two Weasleys and Hermione. "These two kept in touch with me via muggle post, bypassing Dumbledore's illegal owl redirect entirely. If Luna was able to figure it out and teach Neville, then Hermione should have known instinctively how to use the muggle post. Instead, I can't help but wonder if your friendship was just another lie in my life. Go back to Dumbledore and report that I no longer consider you friends. Tell him you failed and pray he doesn't treat failures like Voldemort did. I don't count spies as



friends and I certainly don't count any of Dumbledore's lackeys among my friends either."

Harry then turned and smiled warmly at Luna and Neville. The pair stepped aside so he could leave and watched as he vanished up the hallway.

Neville and Luna then entered the compartment and both looked unhappy with the three people there. Hermione sat in shocked silence, her eyes watering slightly. Ginny looked too stunned to have any reaction and Ron was coloring up for a major Weasley temper tantrum.

Neville directed Luna to the bench seat Harry had just vacated and they sat down.

"I can't believe that prat!" Ron exclaimed. "After all the things we've had to put up with for him!"

"Oh, do shut up, Ron," Neville said calmly. "You three should have expected this. Harry's unhappiness with the Headmaster has been obvious, even to me, and you three blindly followed his orders just like you did in the summer before fifth year. Harry told us all about your ignoring him this summer. Did you honestly expect him to forgive you a second time? I was appalled to find out you three were ignoring him again just because some senile old man said so. I didn't want to believe you could be so stupid, but what I heard here proves Harry was right about you."

Ron stared at Neville in shock.

"You know, I used to envy the three of you. You had something truly special in your friendship with Harry. I can't help but wonder if you'll end up spending the rest of your lives regretting what you threw away today," Luna said, then she cuddled into Neville's side.

Neville grinned and wrapped an arm around her.

"Luna," Ginny said timidly, "why did you call Harry a lord?"

"It was very obvious, and he wasn't trying to hide the fact that he wore a family signet ring. He achieved his majority over the summer, and that means that he ascended to the Head of his House, perhaps

even more than one," she replied airily. "Daddy ran an article about the Ancient and Noble houses, the Potters among them."

"I thought Dumbledore was doing the right thing," Hermione muttered. She wrapped her arms around herself and wondered why she suddenly felt so alone.

"Yes, and you will always be a slave, bowing to authority, Hermione. Even when that authority doesn't have your best interests in mind, you'll still bow and grovel before it," replied Luna.

"Right, Hermione," Neville added acidly. "Because the Headmaster of a school is always allowed to have complete control over his students, even when they aren't in school. Merlin, you people amaze me! You see absolutely nothing wrong with Dumbledore dictating how Harry can live his life? And you willingly ruined your friendship with him to follow that old fools orders!"

Hermione's head jerked back as if she had been slapped and she stared at Luna and Neville.

Neville stood abruptly and held out a hand to Luna. "Come on, let's go find Susan. I find myself agreeing with Harry. I'd rather sit with friends."

Luna smiled brightly and bounced to her feet, then grabbed his hand. She paused by the compartment door and turned to look at the three. "I almost feel sorry for you. But deep down, I think you all knew what you were risking and decided to gamble it anyway."

Then she turned and pulled Neville from the compartment.

"Do you think Harry meant it?" asked Ginny. She was more than a little worried. She had hoped this would be the year they'd start dating. Obviously that wasn't going to happen if he didn't like them any more.

"Nah," asserted Ron. "First time he needs some homework help, he'll come crawling back to Hermione. And we're both on the team, so he has to be nice to us. Besides, his parents and Dumbledore are at school. They'll set him straight."

Ginny nodded uncertainly.

Hermione looked out the window and watched the scenery slip by. Her mind was busy reviewing their confrontation with Harry and she couldn't help but feel that an important part of her life had come to an abrupt end. An icy knot formed in the pit of her stomach. Things had been said about her personality that she wanted to deny, but couldn't.

An uneasy silence descended upon the three young people. Their world had changed and it had caught them by surprise.

Hogwarts Great Hall, September 1st...

Dumbledore was a very unhappy wizard. In the past three weeks there had been some startling revelations that he wished hadn't been made public. It started when Gringotts had leaked information on James and Lily Potter that had the entire wizarding world buzzing.

Harry vanished several days before the Prophet broke the story that his parents were alive and Dumbledore hadn't a clue where the boy had gotten to. All of his friends had agreed to contact him if he showed up at their homes, but he had vanished without a trace. Owls sent to him by Dumbledore and his friends were sent back unopened.

And if that wasn't bad enough, Gringotts had shut down the Potter accounts, locking him and everyone else out. Gringotts merely stated that they had done so at the request of the account holder. When Dumbledore pointed out to them that James Potter should be the account holder, he was firmly told that James Potter had been declared legally dead and was no longer qualified to be the account holder for any Potter account.

James and Lily had been evicted from their home and their house elf refused to answer their calls. Adrift, they had no choice but to turn to Dumbledore for help.

With the accounts frozen, he had no choice but to let James and Lily come to Hogwarts where they could draw a salary as instructors.

Dumbledore shook his head and hoped that Harry would show up today so he could explain what had actually happened. All of the

financial troubles had to be Harry's doing, and without the Potter accounts, the Order of the Phoenix was running out of money fast.

The storm caused by the revelation that James and Lily Potter were alive had nearly been a disaster for Dumbledore. He explained to the press that they had volunteered to go undercover in the hopes of finding and capturing Death Eaters. Normally, such an announcement by Dumbledore would have been front page news, but this time, inexplicably, the story was relegated to a back page, right next to the legal announcements.

He had also explained that Voldemort had attacked Harry that night. But Harry and the press had cast considerable doubt on that story. Harry outright rejected the idea, calling the whole Boy-Who-Lived a cruel hoax perpetrated on the public. The Prophet publicly agreed with Harry about his comments concerning that fateful Halloween night so many years ago. To them, the Boy-Who-Lived was a myth perpetrated on the wizarding world by Dumbledore and the Potters, and Harry was merely a victim.

A few papers put Dumbledore's comments on the front page, but most, led by the Daily Prophet, continued to decry the action of the Potters much to Dumbledore's dismay.

This puzzled Dumbledore, as the Prophet had been quite neutral to either side of the war effort. He knew the paper was owned and operated by Cicero Greengrass, who had kept his family strictly neutral during Voldemort's first rise to power. Now it seems as if he was coming down off the fence and he wasn't on Dumbledore's side.

It never occurred to Dumbledore that the old war was over, and new sides were being drawn up.

The doors to the Great Hall opened and Dumbledore looked up with a smile as the students started to filter in for the start of term feast. His smile slipped some when he saw the small number of students filing towards the Slytherin table.

The news that Voldemort was dead had been kept secret by the Department of Mysteries, so Dumbledore had no explanation for the rash of illnesses that suddenly plagued the wizarding world.

The DoM had been working closely with Harry Potter since his battle with the Dark Lord and his acceptance of their offer. One of the things they learned was that all of the marked Death Eaters were ill and why.

The Dark Lord's Mark had contained an energy siphon that funneled life sustaining force from the Death Eaters to Voldemort's artificial body. With Voldemort dead, the magic continued to funnel power from the Death Eaters in greater and greater amounts. Without Voldemort to regulate the drain, they were doomed. As a result, they were dying, slowly. Most were suffering from fever, extreme exhaustion and violent vomiting. Not a single one was capable of keeping a meal down or getting adequate rest.

Ordinarily this wouldn't have been much of a problem. However, Voldemort had marked a number of Hogwarts students at the beginning of the summer to bolster the flagging ranks of the Death Eaters.

The Unspeakables had decided to keep that information secret until most Death Eaters were beyond the point of any possible recovery. The last war had seen too many Death Eaters walk away from justice. There would be no claims of "being under the imperious curse" this time. They understood the mechanism behind why the Death Eaters were sick, but had decided not to put any effort into finding a cure.

In fact, the one person who might be capable of effecting a cure, since he had the power, if not the knowledge, was Harry. The department kept that information even from him. Clanker, the senior Unspeakable in charge of the new recruits, had opted not to burden Potter and his betrothed with information when no one knew how to save the sick. They only guessed that Potter might be capable of doing it based on his power scores.

Unlike the rest of the Ministry, which answered to either the Minister or the Wizengamot, the Department of Mysteries was largely an autonomous agency working loosely within the framework of the Ministry. Even the Ministry had little clue as to what they did, or who worked for them. The Ministry of Magic would be appalled to discover that the Department of Mysteries considered itself more a part of muggle Ministry of Defense than the Ministry of Magic.

The other decision made by the Department of Mysteries was a simple one, they recruited Harry Potter and his betrothed Daphne Greengrass. Harry's power levels made him a valuable candidate, one that the department was willing to train up to their standards. Daphne's grade work made her an attractive addition and it was decided that she'd be partnered with her husband. They wouldn't be the first husband/wife team that the department had.

Dumbledore didn't know about any of these happenings, however. All he knew was that his former Defense Professor was seriously ill and the school healer was pulling her hair out trying to figure out what was wrong with the man. She had resorted to stunning him so that he could get some rest, but even with that extreme measure, he was slipping away.

As of this morning's report from Madam Pomfrey, Snape had lost almost two thirds of his core to this strange affliction. Soon, he'd begin to stop responding to any magical treatment.

His smile slipped even further when he saw the Weasleys and Hermione Granger enter the room. All three looked like they been severely shaken by something. That had him worried. If they had a problem with Harry, they wouldn't be very useful to his plans for the boy.

He needed them to help Harry and to keep him informed about what he was doing. Harry had become increasingly difficult to influence in the last year, and without his friends, he'd have no clue what the youth was up to. If Harry wasn't talking to them, he'd never listen to anything anyone else had to say.

What remained of his smile turned to a frown when he spotted Harry walk into the hall. He wasn't wearing a school uniform. Up until this moment he had been truly afraid Harry would not return to Hogwarts. He would have been relieved to see him, but seeing him dressed in a traveling cloak, he felt a tinge of worry forming in the pit of his stomach.

Harry walked over to Professor McGonagall and handed her several pieces of parchment, then he waited while she read through them, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Very well, Harry. I am sorry it came to this point but I think I can understand your reasons." she said softly, but still loud enough for Dumbledore to hear her.

Harry nodded to her, then turned to walk over to the Slytherin table. When he reached Daphne, he kissed her cheek, then sat down next to her.

Dumbledore frowned. This couldn't be good at all! He couldn't allow the boy to become involved with Greengrass!

At the Gryffindor table, Ginny Weasley stared across the hall in utter dismay. She watched in horror as Daphne turned slightly and smiled, then reached out and lovingly touched Harry's hand. In that second, she knew she'd never date the Boy-Who-Lived. Ever. She had lost the race before she could even start it.

Around the hall, many heads turned in surprise to see the Slytherin Ice Queen leaning against Harry Potter, while he idly played with her hair and talked to Daphne's sister.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore called, planning on ordering the boy to return to his house table.

Harry ignored him.

"Mr. Potter!" he called in a louder voice.

Now the entire hall was watching the spectacle unfolding before them in confusion.

McGonagall frowned, having just led the first years into the hall. The Headmaster was interrupting the sorting.

"Headmaster, there are no Potters in this hall," Minerva said. Everyone turned to look between Harry and his parents in confusion.

Dumbledore looked at his Deputy as though she'd grown a second head. "Professor McGonagall, I can clearly see Mr. Potter sitting next to Miss Greengrass, and his parents are both sitting at this table. There are three Potters in the hall, and one of them is sitting at the wrong table."

Minerva frowned for a moment, then she turned her full attention on Albus "Headmaster, Mr. Black is only visiting with his betrothed's sister for a moment before they depart. He informed me that he and Daphne both have resigned from Hogwarts, effective today, and will be attending a magical school abroad. As to the Potters, Mr Black has informed me that the Potters as a family have been declared extinct by Gringotts."

Extinct.

A gasp ran through the hall. A family was only declared extinct when there were no living members of a family to be found. It hadn't happened often and it was the nightmare of every pureblood to see the family come to an end. Gringotts was the only institution capable of making such a declaration. It was a power that the Ministry had ceded to the Goblins at the end of the last rebellion.

Dumbledore's expression grew stormy. "Harry, explain this!" he barked.

Harry stood up and glared at the people sitting at the head table. Daphne took his hand and he glanced down at her for a moment, then he nodded and took a calming breath.

Harry turned his attention back to Dumbledore and smirked. "As the last legal living Potter, and the Head of that disgraced family, I have disowned James and Lily. They abandoned the Head of their own family and left him to grow up in a cruel and abusive environment. Since Sirius Black adopted me into his family just prior to his death, I have gratefully accepted his name. As my final acts as Head of the Potter family, I emptied their accounts into my family accounts, sold off their properties and disowned myself. I then had Gringotts declare the Potters extinct. The Potter seat on the Wizengamot has been sold to Gringotts, who will, no doubt, appoint a trustworthy proxy to represent their interests.

"Since then, I have accepted an old betrothal contract that the Black family had outstanding with the Greengrass family. As a favor to my future father-in-law, Daphne and I accompanied Astoria during her journey to the school, but we also wanted to make sure our resignation from Hogwarts was placed into reliable hands. Now that we have finished those tasks, Daphne and I will be leaving. We still need to pack for our journey."



Gasps echoed from various places around the hall.

At the Gryffindor table, Ron and Hermione finally realized fully how much they had lost. Ginny slid bonelessly under the table in a dead faint. Luna and Susan, sitting next to Neville, watched and laughed at the red head.

James Potter stood at the table and glared angrily at his son. "You can't do this! I am the Head of the House!"

Harry shrugged. "No, sir. You are a dead man. You've been legally dead for nearly two decades. Gringotts wouldn't recognize you even if you paid them. Besides, it's too late. It's done, all nice and legal, thanks to Gringotts. The Potter family is no more. It's a pity, too. From what I understand, it was a fine, respected family at one time."

He paused and smiled coldly at the pair. "As for you two, I suggest picking the name of Coward. It fits you both so well."

Lily looked at him with tear filled eyes. "But Harry, we're your parents," she said brokenly. This was unlike any possible outcome she could have imagined! Harry was not only rejecting them as parents, but he was rejecting everything the Potters stood for.

Then her eyes widened as it finally dawned on her that Harry hadn't grown up to understand what the Potter family was about because they hadn't been there to teach him.

"Madam," he replied coldly, "my adopted father is dead, killed by Bellatrix LeStrange in the Department of Mysteries. That is the only parental influence I recognize. As for you two, you are not my parents. You nothing more than gullible fools who ran away from their responsibilities at the behest of an old man with delusions of grandeur. I have been reliably informed that you were aware of what was happening in my life after you abandoned me and you did nothing. So no, I reject the very idea that I might be related to you in any way. Sirius Black adopted me. I am a Black, not the son of a pair of cowards. The Potter line is extinct!"

Harry paused and looked at them harshly. "And don't think I have forgotten the crime you perpetrated on Sirius Black. If you had a family to call your own, I'd declared a blood feud between us!"

Lily broke down with muffled sobs and James looked ready to reach for his wand.

Harry watched James for a moment, then he turned back to Daphne.

He held out a hand and Daphne stood, then shrugged off her student robe, letting it fall to her feet. She pulled a traveling cloak from a bag and expanded it as Harry turned to Daphne's sister.

"Astoria, you have my protection, as well as your fathers, although I daresay you won't need it. Contact us if you need anything."

Astoria looked at Harry and smiled shyly at him. She had confided to her sister that she prayed she got as lucky as Daphne had when it came to a husband. It was something that she felt was possible now. Harry's treatment of Daphne had opened her parent's eyes and perhaps softened her father's position on finding a husband.

Harry and Daphne turned and were about to walk from the hall when Dumbledore stood and called out his name.

He turned and looked at the old man, who smiled at him in a grandfatherly manner. "Harry, as your magical guardian, I cannot allow you to withdraw..."

"I reached my majority this past summer, you imbecile," Harry said tightly. "We're leaving, if you try to stop us, we will fight, and one of us will die."

Dumbledore blinked and stared at him in shock. He had trouble understanding the volume of anger and hatred he was feeling from the boy.

James growled and reached for his wand. Before it could clear his holster, Harry pulled his wand and fired off a bludgeoning hex that threw James up against the wall of the Great Hall. Everyone clearly heard the crack as James hit the wall and broke his arm. He slid to the floor in a moaning heap.

Clearly James, who was once known as a wickedly fast and mean dueler, had allowed his skills to erode, while Harry's skills were still climbing to their pinnacle.

Daphne pulled her own wand, but unlike Harry, who had his attention firmly fixed on the Head table, she covered the house tables in case someone among the students decided to get involved.

Harry's wand was now firmly aimed at Dumbledore, the tip flaring with barely suppressed energy. The old man could tell just from the look in Harry's eye that he wouldn't hesitate to shoot.

"Harry, I must insist that you stop this foolishness," Dumbledore said with a touch of anger.

Harry was about to reply when another replied for him. "Headmaster Dumbledore!" Neville shouted, standing from a spot at the Ravenclaw table. Apparently, Harry wasn't the only one at the wrong table for this feast.

"Lord Black has told you what his intentions are. He is the Lord and Head of his family! By all forms of law that we hold dear, he is an adult. Your attempts to stop him from leaving are an affront to the Black family, as well as a violation of our laws and traditions. Lord Black would be legally within his rights to call the Aurors and have you arrested, or worse, call for a blood feud between your family and his."

Harry stared at his friend in surprise. It was true that Neville had maintained contact with him, once Luna had instructed him in how to use the muggle post, but this level of support surprised him.

"But what of his attack on one of our Professors?" protested Professor Flitwick.

Neville shrugged and briefly glanced at James, who lay moaning softly on the floor, then he turned his attention back to his Charms professor. "He is disowned and dishonored, Professor. Even the Aurors wouldn't lift a hand to aid him. It is the law."

Several students around the hall nodded in response. The simple fact was, they had been cast out of the Potter family and now that family no longer existed. To pure blood society, no matter what their roots, they were now even lower than muggle born.

Harry eyed Neville speculatively. His support was a surprise. He also couldn't help but notice that Neville sat at the Ravenclaw table with Luna and Susan Bones. He was sure that Neville and Luna were forming a relationship, so the inclusion of Susan at the table caught him by surprise.

Lily helped James to his feet, being careful not to jar his arm.

James glared at Harry, while Lily's gaze ran back and forth between the two of them. This was not going the way she had envisioned it at all. Harry was supposed to acknowledge the great sacrifice she and James had made and welcome them back, not treat them with scorn and outright contempt.

Neville turned away from Dumbledore and looked at Harry. "Lord Black, I congratulate you on your betrothal. I failed to reply appropriately earlier on the train and for that I apologize."

Harry arched an eyebrow and nodded. "I understand, Lord Longbottom. You were caught by surprise. Daphne and I hope you will honor us with your presence at our joining celebration this coming solstice."

"You and however many guests you wish to bring," added Daphne, smiling at Luna and Susan.

Both girls blushed heavily and a wave of whispers flooded the hall as others realized that there was another love story still untold.

Neville smiled brightly and nodded, then took his seat between the two girls, who cuddled up to him.

Dumbledore shook from his shock and turned away from Neville. Harry nodded to his friend and took Daphne by the hand. "Ready?"

She nodded with a grin. She was greatly enjoying the ruckus they had caused.

"But but what about Voldemort?" shouted Dumbledore, panicked. He saw Harry and Daphne heading for the door and he lost it. All of their plans were going to be ruined if Harry left. Dumbledore didn't believe that Harry was necessary to kill the Dark Lord, but they had

spent the last 17 years building up the myth. He was a necessary part of the war plan. He was the bait!

"You mean you're too stupid to figure it out? You've had all the clues sitting in front of you for nearly a month now," Harry replied.

Dumbledore looked at him, dumbfounded.

Daphne laughed. "Oh, this is priceless! I can't wait to show Daddy a pensieve memory of this for the paper."

Harry glanced at Daphne and chuckled, then turned his attention back to Dumbledore. "One, Snape falls deathly ill, but you keep him at the castle where the school mediwitch struggles to help him. No offense, Madam Pomfrey, you are an excellent healer for most school related ailments, but clearly Snape's condition was beyond your capabilities."

Dumbledore frowned. Snape's illness was not widely known. He wondered how Harry had learned of it.

Poppy Pomfrey looked up from tending James and grimaced. "You're right. I told the Headmaster that same thing and recommended he be sent to hospital, but the Headmaster insisted we keep him here."

Harry nodded. He knew that sending Snape to the hospital would have no impact on his illness. "Two, after it's decided to let the information leak out, you discover that many other people, all of them marked by Voldemort, are suffering from the same strange illness that afflicts Snape. That includes all of the students missing here today.

"And finally, despite his loss of forces, Voldemort has not attacked anywhere in a month. He was a powerful wizard, and certainly he wouldn't allow the loss of a few mediocre wizards stop his dreams for conquest. He'd fight on alone, if necessary."

Harry paused and glanced around the room. Some of the people were looking very thoughtful, and a few here and there were smiling and beginning to chatter excitedly.

Harry nodded at Luna, who was clutching Neville's arm tightly and practically bouncing in her seat. She had figured it out. "Miss Lovegood, what does that suggest to you?" he called out.

"Voldemort is either dead or captured!" she shouted gleefully.

Harry grinned at his friend and bowed slightly in respect. "Exactly. In fact, the announcement of his death will be made officially in tomorrow's Prophet. He and I fought on my birthday. I killed him and several of his followers that day, including Bellatrix LeStrange and her husband."

Neville turned white and looked down at the table, his fists clutching tightly. Both Susan and Luna rubbed his back comfortingly. Those Death Eaters had been responsible for his losing his parents.

"As to the marked Death Eaters? Well, none of them have enough money to bribe their way out of the sentence of death that their own Master inflicted on them. One by one, they will die and face the justice they so richly deserve," Harry said softly.

The silence that resulted from his pronouncement was profound.

Dumbledore slumped back in his chair and stared at Harry. Even James seemed to shake out of his pain to stare at his son in amazement. The prophecy had been a ruse designed to draw Voldemort out of hiding. It was never expected that Harry would have to fight Voldemort, nor was it expected that he'd fight him alone and win.

While the prophecy had been invented by Dumbledore, no one, not even Harry, understood that by introducing the false prophecy into the war, they set the stage for making it real.

Harry nodded to Neville, who smiled gratefully back at him, then he turned and left the hall with Daphne still gripping his hand tightly.

In the hall, a stunned Headmaster and staff could only stare at their backs, too flabbergasted to say anything.

"Well, there's something you don't see everyday," said a loud voice, "the Headmaster getting publicly kicked in the arse. Why, it just makes me feel all fuzzy inside! Wait, I am fuzzy inside!"

The whole of the Great Hall turned to stare in surprise at the Sorting Hat as it sat on the stool, merrily chortling.

Dumbledore scowled angrily and raised his wand at the hat.

"Headmaster!" shouted a shocked Professor McGonagall.

He flushed and lowered his wand, embarrassed by the fact that he had let his anger nearly get out of control.

Headmaster's Office (after the feast)...

"It's all over," whispered Lily. "Seventeen years wasted because we abandoned our baby."

Dumbledore looked up from his desk. He had been staring at it silently for the past five minutes. "I've sent for Harry's friends. Hopefully they will be able to shed some light on his behavior tonight. I also can't help but wonder if he is being controlled somehow by Miss Greengrass."

"I can believe that," James said angrily, "he didn't act like a Potter at all."

Lily spun and slapped her husband hard and he staggered back. "How can he act like a Potter when we were the ones that were supposed to teach him how to act!" she shouted at him. "We left him with my sister, who hated even looking at him! He grew up being loathed, and you complain because he doesn't conform to the ideals of your family?"

James looked at Dumbledore for a moment, then slowly nodded. The possibility that Harry might not be in control never occurred to him. He was desperate to find a reason, any reason, for Harry's rejection of them. The idea that their abandoning of Harry caused the rejection was too painful to consider.

Lily looked between the two men and sighed. "Idiots," she muttered. "I married one and let another talk me into abandoning my baby. Listen, you morons, he wasn't under an Imperius curse, or potion controlled. If he is being controlled, it's by the age old female trick of

showing her man what real love is like and what he stands to gain by having her in his life!"

The door to the office opened and Harry's friends entered, followed by Professor McGonagall.

"Ah, good. Please take a seat, all of you, and we'll get to the bottom of this," Dumbledore said jovially.

Ginny, Hermione and Ron sat down immediately.

Neville stepped closer to Luna and scowled at the Headmaster. "If you don't mind, Headmaster, we prefer to stand."

Dumbledore blinked and peered at the boy in surprise. Examining him more closely, he realized Neville was no longer a boy. He stood tall, his father's visage, softened only slightly by his mother's eyes, which now glared back at him.

"I assure you, Mr. Longbottom," Dumbledore began.

"Lord Longbottom," Neville said firmly. "I am Longbottom of Longbottom. I hold the family Headship and will assume my place on the Wizengamot at the next session in October. You will address me as my station deserves, or I will ask the Wizengamot to investigate your lack of decorum."

Luna smiled and suppressed a giggle at Dumbledore's astounded expression. She slipped her hand into his and wished that they could have brought Susan with them. Unfortunately, Susan wasn't considered one of Harry's close friends.

The Headmaster's expression gave way to a frown. "Very well, my Lord. Perhaps you can enlighten us as to why Harry Potter acted the way he did?"

Luna laughed again and Dumbledore turned his attention to her. "Miss Lovegood? You find the question amusing?"

"Yes, I do," she said with another giggle. "You lock him up with people who hate him. You order your minions here to ignore him and not contact him at all over the summer. You routinely place him in danger and then pat him on the head before sending back to



those terrible muggles. You do all that, and still expect him to look up to you? He despises you, Headmaster. He hates you almost as much as he hated Voldemort."

Dumbledore rocked back on his chair as though he'd been struck.

McGonagall's eyes widened as she stared at the blonde.

Neville touched her arm and she turned to him. He shook his head at her and her smiled slipped. "Don't bother my sweet. They'll never understand."

She nodded and he pulled her towards the door.

"Lord Longbottom, I have not given you permission to leave," Dumbledore snapped angrily.

Neville turned to him. "Headmaster," he said, stressing the title. "The Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot has no authority within these walls. The Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards has no authority within these walls. And since you didn't call us up here to discuss issues related to school, you have no authority to hold us.

"You asked us all to betray Harry this summer, and while your minions followed your orders, Luna and I did not. I know full well how much you've been controlling his life and the lives of others. Harry refuses to put up with it any longer."

"Stop this useless fighting!" shouted Lily, then she turned tearfully to Neville. "Please, do you know how to contact him? I... We need to talk to him. It's very important. We want to explain things."

"You don't get it, do you?" asked Luna softly. "There's nothing to explain. No amount of confessing or pleading can wash the stain from your souls. What you did was true evil. You abandoned your baby to monsters and you'll spend eternity regretting it."

"We do not know how to contact Harry. But even if we did, we would not share that information. In time he will contact us, but even then he'll give us an intermediate address to send any letters to. You won't be able to find him until he wants to be found.

"Come on, Luna," he said, then pulled her through the open door.

The door closed behind them and Lily turned to James. He wrapped his arms around her and she stifled a sob against his shoulder. He was coming to realize that the grand plan they had thought up had been totally destroyed by his son. His son, who now hated and despised him. Their grand plan wasn't all that grand.

"I'm hearing a lot of things here that I don't like," Minerva said angrily. "Miss Granger? Miss and Mister Weasley? Did you really ignore your friend this past summer?"

Ginny sniffled and nodded. "The Headmaster told us that we shouldn't write him. We all agreed, but Luna found a way to send letters to Harry and she taught Neville how to do the same."

McGonagall glared at Dumbledore for a long moment. "What right have you to decide who can and can't contact Harry during the summers? You had no authority to do that," she hissed.

He looked taken aback by her tone. "Minerva, I only did what was best for all of us," he replied gently.

"No, you've been playing your games again," she retorted, then she turned to Harry's friends. "Miss Weasley, Mister Weasley, I'll have your prefect badges. Miss Granger, you are Head Girl this year, so I am unable to take away your position, as it was appointed by the Headmaster. However, I can't begin to express how disappointed -" She paused and shook her head. "No, how disgusted I am with all three of you!"

"So noted, Deputy Headmistress," said the sorting hat from its perch on a shelf. There was a faint ringing sound, then Ginny and Ron's badges vanished from their robes and reappeared in Minerva's outstretched hand. Minerva's revocation of their position had been enforced by Hogwarts.

For the second time that day, Hermione looked as though she'd been slapped.

Minerva pocketed the badges, then turned to face James and Lily. This was her first real opportunity to confront the Potters and she intended on taking advantage of it. "I don't know who you are

anymore. I was hurt and shocked to discover you were alive this summer. But what you did to your son was unforgivable. Never in all my life would I have imagined the House of Gryffindor would suffer such a disgrace. As if Pettigrew wasn't bad enough!"

"Minerva, please!" Dumbledore said in a pained tone. "Our plan was to use Harry to draw Voldemort into a trap of my devising. We would have seen that Harry was safe all the time. The prophecy was just a ruse. We were losing the war. We had to do something."

"And we all know how well that worked," she retorted scathingly. "In your rush to find a way to get to You-Know-Who, you introduced a wild card, Albus! You made the prophecy valid by forcing Voldemort into believing it. You created the situation that you currently find yourselves in now!"

Minerva paused and looked at everyone. "What will you do now? The child you set up to be your bait has defeated the Dark Lord and several of the nastiest duelers we've ever seen. He's a man now and he's turned his back on you all. He'll be married before the year is out and Miss Greengrass is probably one of the truest Slytherins in that house. She'll temper his urge to leap, but she won't lift a single finger to help him forgive any of you. By her way of looking at it, you hurt him. If she has her way, she'll destroy you all."

The silence in the room grew oppressive, then Ron broke the silence. "Does this mean you can't get Harry back? Who will be our seeker this year?"

Minerva shook her head in disgust and walked out of the office, muttering to herself angrily about ever appointing a moron to the position of Prefect.

Greengrass Manor, September 2nd...

"Packing already?"

Harry looked up from the large trunk he was placing items into and smiled at Priscilla. "I want to get a jump on it. I never liked waiting until the last minute."

She nodded and entered the room. "I think you'll find it easier to pack your books on the bottom first, then your clothing on top," she offered.

He looked down at the open trunk and nodded. "Yes, that might work."

Priscilla smiled to herself and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Why didn't you buy a multi-compartment trunk?"

He looked down at the old battered trunk. "To be honest, it never occurred to me. I've never owned enough stuff that this old trunk couldn't handle it all."

Priscilla nodded and pat the spot on the bed next to her. "Sit for a moment, Harry. I would like to talk to you."

He blinked and looked at her in surprise before complying.

Priscilla looked around the room for a moment, then she sighed. "I always felt that my daughter leaving would be a time of happiness. The truth is, it's bittersweet. I'm happy for her and what she has found with you."

She turned her attention back to him and eyed him for a moment. "I'm sad to know that she'll be so very far away for the next few months, and a little worried because you'll both be living close to so many muggles."

"She'll be fine, Mrs. Greengrass," Harry said softly. "I'll keep her safe. As far as the muggles go, I think it would do her some good to see what else the world has to offer."

She nodded absently. "You'll take care of her and yourself?"

Harry smiled re-assuredly. "With my life, if necessary," he replied, then his expression changed. "Is there something wrong? Where is Daphne, anyway?"

"No, nothing is wrong. It's just a mother's right to worry. Daphne will be along in an hour or two. She was going through the paperwork Professor McGonagall sent over this morning and found a problem in her transcript that she wanted to get fixed."

He nodded unhappily. He didn't like the idea of her going to that school alone, but she was an adult. He glanced at the wall clock and decided that if she hadn't returned in two hours, he'd go make sure she was safe.

"Harry?"

He turned his attention back to Daphne's mum. "Ma'am?"

"I want you to understand something. Something that I think Daphne probably hasn't explained to you. Daughters of pure blood families are raised to be married off by their father."

Harry grimaced and nodded. "Yes, she told me about that."

She smiled tightly and touched his arm. "Bear with me on this. It's important that you understand that a daughter is taught to build a wall around her emotions and control them tightly. Most young women are placed into marriages where their wishes and desires are ignored. It's not uncommon for husbands to attempt to beat their wives into submission, nor is it uncommon for husbands and wives to injure each other seriously, before achieving a balance in the marriage. Pure blood daughters have options that the others in our society do not have, but the husband still commands the household."

She paused and smiled softly at Harry. "That is what most pure blood women experience, and that is what I taught Daphne to expect from her marriage. Like myself, she expected to be forced into a marriage with a man she didn't know, and be forced to submit to his will. I was lucky, in that Cicero, while very traditional, was a gentle man. He follows traditions, but he had no desire to force me to submit to his whims.

"Now, Daphne had hoped to have something like that with her marriage and instead what she got was you."

Harry blinked and stared at her. "Ma'am?"

She grinned. "I didn't mean that in a bad way, Harry. Daphne has in you a man who wants more than a submissive wife. You gave Daphne a precious gift, whether you know it or not, by asking for her

opinion and pushing her to go beyond what she was taught to think of as her role in life. As a result, she's tearing down her walls, the walls I had taught her to build up around herself to protect her, emotionally. Outwardly, she still the same and my husband would scoff at the ideas I'm speaking to you about.

"But you need to understand. She's come to trust you, if not love you, already. You hold her heart in your hands and can hurt her far more than the worst curse. That worries me, Harry. It worries me because my daughter can be so badly hurt by you."

"I'd never do anything to hurt her," Harry said slowly. "I think that we both have the power to hurt each other."

Priscilla leaned back and smiled in relief. She had been afraid that the relationship was completely one sided.

"It's hard for me to put into words what she means to me. I'm amazed to find that someone who was a complete stranger to me a month ago, could now be so important to my life."

He looked down and flushed slightly. "I don't know if she told you about my life before Hogwarts, but it wasn't a good one."

He looked up and captured her gaze with his. "I do know I've never felt this way about anyone before. It's like there was a piece of me missing and she's filled it."

Priscilla's grin widened and she reached out and squeezed his shoulder comfortingly. "I can't tell you how glad I am to hear you say that. Cherish her always, Harry, and she will dedicate her life and soul to you. You both have something special to offer each other."

She stood and walked to the door. "Thank you for talking to me about this. You've eased my concerns."

Harry nodded and went back to his packing, all the while wondering about the mysteries of the female mind.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Minerva looked up from her copy of the paper when someone knocked at her door.

"Come!"

Daphne entered and sat down in front of Minerva's desk.

"Miss Greengrass, I got your message about the missing pages from your transcript. I took the liberty of making a new copy for you," she said, passing the paperwork to her. "I'm not sure how the record became incomplete, but I am looking into it."

She wouldn't tell Daphne, but she suspected Albus tampered with the files as a delaying tactic.

"Thank you, Professor."

"If you don't mind, would you answer a few questions for me?" Minerva asked hesitantly.

Daphne nodded, a bit warily. She didn't know McGonagall well, but she knew Harry trusted her and that was good enough for her.

"Are you happy with your situation? Is Harry?"

Minerva stood before Daphne could answer and paced for a moment. "It wasn't until last night that I realized just how much I had failed to protect his interests here at school. I won't even start on how disappointed I am in his parents, or his friends. Both Weasley children have lost their Prefect positions, and I would have taken Head Girl away from Miss Granger, but that position wasn't assigned by me."

Daphne looked at the older woman for a moment, then she made a decision. "You know how I was raised, what was expected of me."

Minerva nodded. She, too, had been raised in a similar manner, although her marriage had been bitter and thankfully brief, lasting less than twenty years.

"Harry came into my life and asked me what I wanted. He said people had been making decisions for him all his life and he refused to make a decision for me without asking what I wanted."

Minerva slowly sat down and a small smile formed on her her face. "I can imagine how shocked you were with that. But knowing Harry, I would expect no less from him."

Daphne returned her smile. "Then you can understand when I tell you that I would do anything for him. He's shown me a world I didn't think I'd ever get to experience. He could order me to do the most degrading of acts, but he would never dream of using the authority we grant the men in our society. He's shown me that life can be so much more than I ever dreamed and I can't imagine life without him now."

She paused and unconsciously tightened the scroll in her hand while she put into words feelings she had only recently come to recognize in herself.

"He wants me," she said in a half whisper. "Not as a submissive docile wife, bearing his children. No, he wants me as his partner, his equal. It's crazy, but that's what he wants. And what's even crazier is that is what I want to be. His partner."

Minerva nodded, pleased at her words. It was easy to see that this young woman had deep feelings for Harry. As much as she personally felt she had failed the boy, she was glad he had found someone who would put his needs above their own.

She pulled out a slip of parchment and scribbled something on it before handing it to Daphne.

Taking the note, Daphne glanced at it for a moment, then looked up at Minerva.

"My private address. Mail sent there will reach me and no other will know about it," Minerva said softly. "Please tell Harry that I am sorry I couldn't have done better for him and that I would like him to keep in touch. He was a good student, you both were, and we'll miss both of you around here."

Daphne smiled. "I'm sure he would like that. As angry as he is with many people here, you and Professor Flitwick are two people he respects the most. Harry is aware of what you have done for him in the past, and he does appreciate it. He told me about the summer packages you slipped into his trunk each year."



Minerva blinked back a tear and nodded mutely. She hadn't known that Harry was aware of some of her activities. Suspecting he wasn't being fed properly, and because Albus refused to do anything about it, she'd had the house elves make up a selection of foods that she slipped into his trunk under preservation charms. It wasn't much, but it was enough to tide him over for a week or two.

A knock interrupted their conversation.

"One moment, Miss Greengrass," Minerva said. "Come!"

The door opened and Hermione entered. "Deputy Headmistress, here is the report on the point deductions..."

She trailed off, seeing Daphne sitting with Minerva.

Daphne glanced up at her, then turned her attention to Minerva. "Professor, may I have a moment's time with your Head Girl?"

Minerva blinked and smiled thinly. "Of course, Miss Greengrass, take as much time as you need." Then she stood and walked around her desk and out of the office.

Daphne looked at Hermione, who stared back at her uncertainly. "You know, of all of Harry's friends, I think you're the one that surprised me the most. I can easily discount the Weasley's, since they grew up worshiping at the feet of Dumbledore. But you? You're a muggle born. You never knew about Dumbledore until you came to this school, and if what Harry has told me is true, you should have been wary of authority figures. He said that it was pretty common to discover that muggle leaders were corrupt."

Hermione scowled and crossed her arms. "Are you controlling Harry? Are you using potions or a spell on him?"

Daphne smirked. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Pure Dumbdorean idiocy. Tell me, oh smartest witch of the generation, did Harry exhibit any of the standard symptoms of being controlled? Was he lethargic and slow to respond, as though under a potion? Did he appear to be euphoric, as though he were under the Imperious curse? Did he looked to me for guidance and instructions at the feast, or did he act independently?"

Hermione blinked and chewed on her lower lip while she considered the events of the feast. In retrospect, it was apparent that the only one controlling Harry was Harry.

"By pure blood law, Harry has far more control over me than I have over him, but refuses to exercise it. He has come to rely on me as much as I have come to rely on him."

"But Dumbledore..."

"Dumbledore be damned!" Daphne replied evenly. "He isn't a god, Miss Granger. He's only a man, and not much of one if the rumors about him and Grindelwald are true."

Daphne leaned back and shook her head. "You know, I was wrong. I once thought that if there was any girl for Harry, it would have been you. You come from similar backgrounds, so understanding each other would have been easy. All that changed this summer, however. And when he showed up at my house, he was trying as best he could to embrace our way of life, without losing too much of his own in the process.

"Up until this summer, you could have easily slipped into his life and made him yours. But you didn't. You followed orders like a good little girl and now he's mine."

"But Harry doesn't feel that way..."

Daphne waved a hand, dismissing her complaint. "That's your own fault. No one ever showed him love before. You could have taken that first step for him. Had you encouraged him in the slightest, I never would have had stood a chance with him.

"Instead, you decided to step aside and let the little Weasel try for him, while you settled for mediocrity. Harry would have never fallen for her, she's too much like her own mother. He also knew that she didn't see him, only the legend."

She cocked her head slightly. "Tell me something, Granger. Will your future husband allow you to have a career? I expected to never have one, but that changed when Harry came into my life. Now my life looks much like yours should have been. A career, a husband

and a family. He's already famous, but with he and I working together, he'll become a legend and I will give him powerful sons and daughters to love. I will be there to help him make his mark on our world, while you sink into obscurity, drowning in Weasley offspring."

Daphne stood and looked the girl up and down for a moment. "Ronald Weasley is a pure blood son from a poor family. The only difference between him and Draco Malfoy is money. Deep down, he is just as bigoted as Draco. He lacks any motivation and any sort of real work ethic. Ask him, and he will tell you that a wife's place is in the home, raising her children. Harry asked me to be his partner, not his brood mare. When the time comes for us to make love, I will do so willingly because he makes me feel wanted and loved. I will willingly do things for him that another man would have to order me to do."

She walked to the door, past a stunned Hermione, then paused and turned. "I doubt we'll meet again, so allow me to pass on this one piece of advice to you, Granger. Get smart. Look up the laws and traditions governing marriages in our society. A woman has very little say in a magical marriage, and a muggle born has even less. The moment you agree to marry Weasley, he will own you.

"Goodbye, Granger. And thank you for giving Harry to me."

Daphne closed the door behind her and turned to see Professor McGonagall standing there, trying hard not to smile. It was obvious that she had not only been listening to their conversation, but approved of what she had said to Hermione.

"I'll see you get an invitation to our bonding, Professor," Daphne said.

Minerva nodded. "I will look forward to it. Good luck at your new school, and take care of Harry."

Daphne smiled. "Always."

Headmaster's office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

While Daphne was saying farewell to the Deputy Headmistress, the Headmaster sat in his office, staring at the morning edition of the

Daily Prophet, which announced in 50 point font, the demise of Lord Voldemort at the hand of Harry Potter.

It was confirmation of what he hadn't wanted confirmed. All his planning and scheming for the past sixteen years had been for naught. He and his Order of the Phoenix had been rendered superfluous because of one teenage boy in a snit.

Voldemort was dead and he couldn't seem to understand why things happened the way they did.

"It doesn't make any sense," he muttered.

Fawkes trilled a mournful note and he glanced over at his familiar.

"Oh, it makes perfect sense, Headmaster. You're just too set in your beliefs to see it," said the sorting hat.

Fawkes trilled again and the hat turned to the bird. "I know that, Fawkes, but he'll never figure it out without help. You know that as well as I."

Fawkes bobbed his head and trilled again.

The hat bent its tip towards the bird, then turned its attention back to Dumbledore. "As I was saying. It makes perfect sense. Your problem is that you fail to understand the consequences of your actions."

"I'd like to understand," Dumbledore said honestly.

"Very well, Headmaster, consider this. Many years ago, you hatched a plan that resulted in the creation of a false prophecy. You then fed the first part to your pet Death Eater who, in turn, passed it onto his master.

"Your goal at that point was a simple one. You'd do to Tom Riddle what you did to your former lover - lock him up and throw away the key. You knew he couldn't be killed, but a horcrux can't be used to bring someone back to life if they aren't dead. You thought to draw him out and capture him, then you'd be able to hunt down his horcruxes at your leisure.

"You and others decided, on your own, that sacrifices had to be made, and then selfishly decided that you wouldn't be the ones doing the sacrificing."

Dumbledore nodded impatiently. He already knew this.

"You know, Headmaster, magic is a funny thing. You wizards routinely fail to understand that magic is more than just power. There is a living intelligence behind magic - a super-mind, if you will. And there are times when man, in his hubris, does something that has long reaching consequences, simply because magic decides to make it so."

Dumbledore stared at the hat in horror. The idea of some sort of intelligence behind his magic scared him silly. It sounded too much like the hat was describing some sort of deity.

"In your rush to capture Riddle, you created a prophecy and convinced Voldemort to believe in it. Not satisfied with your plan, magic stepped in and turned your prophecy from a fraud to a reality. Magic didn't like the plan you came up and disliked what you were doing to innocents, all for some nebulous 'greater good'."

"No, it can't be," Dumbledore whispered. The hat was implying that Harry Potter was a very powerful wizard, perhaps even more powerful than he was!

"You'd like it to be otherwise, and I know you're already thinking that Riddle isn't dead. I'm afraid that once again magic stepped in. As strange as it might seem, she likes the young Lord Black. It was she that put the spell into his mind that killed the Dark Lord. She needed a special circumstance and caused it to come about. The young Lord used a spell that forced the Horcruxes to think that Voldemort had willingly ended his life, causing their enchantment to end.

"Voldemort is well and truly dead and his soul is whole once again. He is beyond any possible resurrection."

Fawkes trilled and Dumbledore glanced over at his familiar.

"As for young Harry Black, his betrothed will be a welcome influence in his life. They will thrive and she will push him to reach heights never possible under your controlling influence. You tried to create a

myth and magic took your victim and made him something more. There are plans for young Lord Black, plans beyond your petty schemes and minor Dark Lords. He has his mate and I truly believe she will make him happy and I think that pleases magic most of all."

Dumbledore could only stare at the sorting hat in amazement and a touch of fear. The idea that someone could have as much power as Voldemort, plus something more, scared him.

Salem, Mass, USA, September 4th...

Harry opened the door and gestured to Daphne, who looked uncertain and just a bit bewildered.

"I thought you said it was a small place?" she asked.

"Compared to your home, or even Black Manor, this is small. There are five bedrooms, but only three of them are set up as such. The other two are set up as studies, one for each of us. As for the rest of the house, well, the Yanks are pretty good at mixing electricity and magic, so we have electrical lighting, and a room with a telly and wireless. Dobby will have to get used to cooking with a muggle stove, but I don't think he'll have many problems with that."

She nodded thoughtfully and stepped into the large foyer. It was a modern looking home but alien to what she was used to. The house was furnished and tastefully decorated in cheerful, bright colors, but it had an unlived in feeling to it, as if it were ready for someone to turn it into a home.

Harry took her hand and pulled her into the large living room. He waved towards the windows where she could see the other houses in the area, close by, but not too close. "It's a mixed neighborhood, as there are several other people from the school living around here. Gringotts suggests that we should just assume that everyone around us is a muggle until we learn otherwise."

She nodded. "So, three bedrooms are furnished?"

He nodded absently, while still looking around. Like Daphne, he hadn't seen the house before. It had all been arranged via Gringotts and he was privately very pleased with what Griphook had accomplished. It wasn't in the same class as Daphne's home, or

even Black Manor, now that it had been refurbished, but it was comfortable in a way that the Dursley's home had never been.

"I do hope the other two bedrooms are for guests. I have grown quite comfortable sleeping with you and I have no intention of changing that," Daphne said.

Harry glanced back at her and grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that. To be honest, I didn't like the idea of you not being in the bed with me."

She walked over to him and took his hand. "So, do you know which bedroom is ours?"

He shook his head. "I haven't seen this place before either. But we have a few hours before we need to take that potion, so we can explore and figure out which bedroom we want."

The school had given them both a potion that would allow them to adjust to East Coast time in a single night.

She arched an eyebrow at him. He was always saying something that she could twist slightly and tease him about. "So, you want us to try out three bedrooms in a few hours? Do you think you can manage it?"

She almost laughed when he blushed and looked down. Moving closer, she lifted his chin with a finger and smiled at him when he met her gaze. "Sometimes you make it too easy for me to tease you," she whispered. "Let's go figure out which bedroom is ours. Like you said, we still have a few hours to kill before we need to take our potions. Trying out a new bedroom sounds like fun."

Hogwarts Library, September 15th...

Hermione slowly closed the book and leaned back in her chair tiredly.

Greengrass wasn't lying to me, she thought bitterly. She had wanted so much to be able to prove Greengrass wrong. Around her chair were piles of books, some twelve books high. She had spent the last week and a half researching everything she could find on marriage

laws in Wizarding society and had finally come to the conclusion that Greengrass had been right.

On the heels of that idea came another. I really did give him to her, she thought sourly. All she'd had to do was encourage Harry even slightly and she could have had him. Harry would have been perfect for her, too; slightly pliable, intelligent and not the slightest bit interested in controlling anyone. With Harry, she could have had a normal relationship, like her parents had.

Then she considered her options. She could continue to see Ron and hope for the best, but she knew deep down that he'd revel in the power a formal engagement/betrothal would grant him. Or she could break it off with him now, while she still had control over her own destiny.

It wasn't that there were no boys like Harry among her classmates. There were quite a few that would not have resorted to using the authority granted to them by society. No, the problem was that most of those boys were already taken and the one she knew she could have had, the one she would have wanted to have, she let slip through her fingers.

She sighed and ran a tired hand over her face.

"Someone has been studying too hard," said a voice.

She started and looked up from her table to see Professor Evans. Lily had taken back her old family name and had moved into another apartment within the castle. Her marriage to James was on extremely shaky ground. Divorce wasn't an option, but because James wasn't interested in beating her into compliance, she had been allowed to move out. They would stay married for the rest of their lives, but unless they could reconcile, they would live separate lives.

"No, this isn't school related. I'm looking into the current marriage laws in the Wizarding world," Hermione said softly.

Lily eyed the books then nodded to herself. "So, someone was kind enough to give you a warning? Most of us find out the hard way."



Hermione dropped her eyes to the books and nodded. "You could call it a warning, in an vaguely insulting way."

Lily arched an eyebrow and Hermione flushed. "Greengrass. That is, Daphne Greengrass told me about it after she thanked me for giving Harry to her."

Lily pulled a chair away from the table and sat down across from Hermione. "I see," she replied quietly.

Ignoring the look from Lily, Hermione plunged forward with her explanation. "She said that up until this summer I could have had Harry. I could have made him mine and he would have treated me like any other muggle raised man would have treated me, with love and respect. What wizards have... It's barbaric and demeaning to women in general and hideous to muggleborn. You can call it a marriage, but it's really slavery for a muggleborn woman."

Hermione looked up at Lily across the table. "She said I let him go because I was willing to listen to others that suggested that Ginny Weasley would be better for him."

"You're dating Ronald Weasley now, aren't you?" asked Lily.

"I was, but no longer."

Lily peered at Hermione in surprise.

Hermione shivered slightly and pushed a book away from her. "Unlike Harry, Ron would enjoy being able to order me about. I haven't told him yet, but we're through. Knowing what I now know, it's unlikely I would ever date a wizard again. Even half blood wizards have too much authority over their spouses. It's the Wizarding world's dirty little secret."

Lily nodded sadly. She was trapped, but Hermione was smart enough to see the writing on the wall before she became committed.

Lily had moved out on James, but she knew that she was as much to blame for what they did to their son as he was. She counted herself lucky that James didn't feel the need to boss her around like so many pureblood husbands would have done.

"What will you do, then?"

Hermione shrugged. "I'll wait until this year is over, then move on. There's a program I can get into that will help me enter a muggle university. After that? Who knows. Hopefully a career and maybe I'll find someone for myself."

"So you'll leave the wizarding world?" Lily pressed.

Hermione looked down at her hands on the table before looking back up at Lily. "Once... once I thought this world was everything I could possibly hope for. But the last few weeks? It's been like someone has removed blinders from my eyes."

Hermione pierced Lily with her gaze. "You were a hero, someone to look up to and emulate. A martyr to the side of the light, and now the truth is known. We followed a man as blindly as the Death Eaters followed Voldemort. Has anyone punished him? Or you and your husband? No. Like so many times in the past, it's not what you've done, but who you know that allows you to escape justice.

"Harry opened my eyes to the Wizarding world. It's no better or worse than the muggles, but at least the muggles offer me an opportunity for equality. So, yes, Professor Evans, I intend to leave this world behind. I will not submit to the slavery they call marriage. I'll find a nice muggle man who cares about me and I'll have a career and a family. And if any of my children are magical, they will be sent to school in France or the States."

Hermione stood and looked down at Lily, who had paled through her diatribe. "It's a small comfort, but for a few short years I had the friendship of Harry Potter. He was a hero in every sense of the word. But you'll never know that, will you? He is everything you were supposed to be. You'll never know just how many people you've hurt. Harry, while obviously the most important, is only the tip of the iceberg."

She started to turn when Lily finally spoke.

"It's harder to leave than you realize. This world lulls you into a sense of complacency. When my husband and I first agreed to the plan to leave Harry, it was only supposed to be for a few short

weeks, or maybe a month or two. After a time, it became easier to keep things the way they were than to change them."

"Then we both have regrets, Professor. You gave up your son and I gave up my best friend. What did the Headmaster call it? Oh, yes, sacrifices needed to be made. Now the war is over and I don't like the sacrifice I was forced to make. I'm done following Dumbledore and I'm done sacrificing for this world," Hermione replied, then she turned and walked away from the table.

Lily sighed and tiredly wiped at her face. "That didn't go well at all," she muttered.

"Did you honestly expect it to go otherwise?"

Startled, Lily looked up to see Minerva standing not far away.

"As much as it pains me to say it," McGonagall continued, "Miss Granger needed to be smacked down before she could grow up. Her leaving our world will be a great loss, but she is right to cut her ties. Like Miss Granger, I, too, have had the blinders pulled off and what I see of the great Albus Dumbledore and his followers disgusts me."

Minerva turned her attention fully on Lily. She gestured to a chair and Lily nodded.

"This past summer has changed us all. And some, like Miss Granger, have grown up because of it."

"Minerva, if I could take back the past I would in a heartbeat," Lily whispered.

"Unfortunately, no one can change the past," Minerva replied. "You can only go forward and try to rebuild your life. Some parts you can never recapture. Harry is gone and I doubt he will ever allow you entry into his life in any way. But you still have James, and perhaps you two can reconcile your differences. You bear a heavy burden, and it would be better if you shared that burden, rather than bear it alone."

Lily nodded unhappily. Minerva wasn't offering her an olive branch, she was just telling her that life might be better if she stayed with

James. Once she had been a friend of Minerva's and she had respected the older woman greatly. But she had lost that friendship when the truth had come out.

Minerva nodded to herself and left the library. The first two weeks of school had been an agonizing drag. There was a simmering undercurrent of anger towards James and Lily from the students. The Head Girl was all but ignored by most students and prefects. And Albus had taken to staying inside his office most of the day, not caring for the hostile looks aimed his way whenever he left it.

Headmaster's Office, September 20th...

"Headmaster?"

Albus sighed and looked up from the parchment he had been reading. "Yes, Poppy?"

"Headmaster, Severus Snape passed at six minutes past nine this morning."

Dumbledore pulled his glasses off and laid them on the desk, then he pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. He had been expecting this news for the past several days. The papers were full of news of former Death Eaters dying.

Whole lines were passing into extinction and the Wizarding world didn't know whether to mourn or cheer the loss of Death Eaters.

The Malfoy family was all but gone. Narcissa remained, as did several remote cousins who didn't live in Britain, but the Head of House, as well as his direct heir, had died a week before. Along with Malfoy, the Nott, Goyle, Crabbe and Parkinson families had been decimated. The Wizengamot had lost fourteen members and the Ministry had lost thirty five employees, including three department Heads.

"Headmaster? Did Severus have any family?" asked Poppy.

"No. His father, Tobias, has been dead for nearly a decade, and his mother even longer," Dumbledore said quietly. "I don't think he had any particular preferences about burial details, either."

Dumbledore paused and took a deep breath. It finally dawned on him that, although he had used Snape for his plans, he actually considered the man a friend. The pain of his death was a surprise to him.

"I will alert Gringotts, Poppy. Unless they have specific instructions, we'll put him to rest in the castle cemetery."

"Very good, Headmaster. I'll prepare him," Poppy said solemnly. "Will you alert the staff and students? He might have some friends..."

She trailed off realizing that the chances of Snape having any friends among the students was practically zero.

"I'll handle it," he replied.

She nodded and her head vanished from the fireplace.

Dumbledore looked back down at the parchment on his desk. It was from the Ministry, informing him that all of the victims of Voldemort's sickness were to be buried without fanfare or ceremony. The DMLE had released information stating that the Dark Mark had to be willingly accepted and therefore anyone who had died of the sickness had been a willing Death Eater.

It was a confidential memo, not to be released to the general public, and it put Dumbledore in a difficult position. Snape had served him faithfully for many years, but they could not give him a proper burial.

"Damn," he muttered. "If only Harry Potter hadn't been so stubborn."

"Don't blame the boy for your own hubris, Headmaster," the sorting hat said. "He merely became what you made him. As for Snape, like so many others, he is finally receiving the justice he deserves."

"But Snape was on our side!" Albus exclaimed in protest.

"Was he truly? Was he truly loyal to you, or was Snape loyal only to Snape?" asked the hat. "It doesn't matter anymore. But ask yourself, even if he was loyal to you and your cause, did his actions after the first war and during the second erase the stain on his soul from the

killing he performed to earn his Mark? And are you qualified to make that judgment?"

Dumbledore glared sourly at the hat. Since this year's sorting, it seemed to take a perverse pleasure in rubbing Dumbledore's nose in facts he didn't want to face.

Greengrass Manor, September 22nd...

Priscilla looked up from her book when Cicero entered the room.

"So, how did it go?" she asked.

"Like a charm," he replied. "Steven slipped in among the press attending today and managed to get to the bathroom. He says it didn't take long to convince her of the change. Apparently, being tied to a U bend for sixty years was enough to convince her she needed a change of scenery. He also said the Ministry enchantments on her were surprisingly easy to break."

Priscilla nodded. She remembered Myrtle the ghost from her own days at Hogwarts. She had been an unholy terror to the younger years and a vicious annoyance to any older couple who tried to use the bathroom for a late night liaison.

The plan was elegant and simple. A family friend liked to dabble in necromancy and he owed them a favor. Slipping into a press party held at the school by Albus Dumbledore, Steven had slipped away from the conference and had visited Myrtle to offer her a conditional freedom.

Myrtle would be allowed to leave her bathroom three days a week, providing she spent two of them with a certain family from Surrey. Myrtle would be allowed to torment the family as she pleased, knowing that no one outside of the Dursleys would be capable of seeing her during her visits.

An elf popped into the room and handed Cicero a tumbler with a finger of malt whiskey. He took a sip, sat down, then looked over at his wife of twenty two years. "I wasn't sure Daphne had the right idea until I had Harry's old family investigated. If anything, Daphne understated just how badly he had been treated."

He took another sip.

"Myrtle has had the situation explained to her and she is looking forward to some unrestricted play time," he said finally.

Priscilla nodded. "And the enchantment?"

"Worked as promised. As long as Myrtle is at Privet Drive, or harassing one of the Dursleys, she'll be invisible to everyone except them. Even wizards won't be able to see her if she's around a Dursley," Cicero said smugly. He had paid good money for that particular charm.

He looked over at his wife and lifted one eyebrow when he noted she was holding a book on accounting practices.

"That's an odd book to be reading for pleasure."

She glanced down at her book then closed it and looked up at him. "Your cousin, Sigmund, said he needed help and I thought I might apply for the position."

"You? Whatever for?" he asked in surprise.

She placed the book on the table and waved a hand. "Look around you, dear. The elves do most of the work here in the house and the days of my home schooling Astoria are long over. What else do I have to do, other than wander from room to room or spend time in the garden during the summer months? Working as an accountant for your cousin might not sound all that appealing to you, but I like working with numbers. I think I'd make a good accountant for him."

Cicero frowned and stood up. He walked over to the fireplace and put his drink on the mantle, then wiped his face tiredly. "I suppose I should have seen this coming," he murmured. "This is mostly Harry's fault."

"Ci, don't blame that boy for this. I've been thinking about this for a long time now," she said, cutting in.

He looked down for a moment and she worried about his response.

"I could tell you not to do this," he said softly.

"You could and I would, of course, bow to my husband's wishes," she replied coldly.

Cicero winced slightly.

The pair settled into an uneasy silence. The minutes slowly ticked away until Cicero finally turned to Priscilla. She held her breath, watching him carefully.

Cicero sighed and shook his head. "I don't like it," he muttered and Priscilla's heart fell. "I don't like it," he repeated, then he caught her gaze with his. "But if there is one thing I've learned, thanks for our young lord, it's that the happiness of our family is more important than some old traditions. If you think this would make you happy, then you may do this."

Priscilla watched her husband for a moment longer, before realizing that he was afraid. It shocked her to think of her husband fearing anything, but there it was. He was afraid that, sooner or later, she wouldn't need him.

He was a strong, proud man, and a good father, even if he wasn't very demonstrative with his children. But for all his strengths, she suddenly realized that he needed her and he needed to know she needed him. He didn't understand that a job outside of her traditional role wouldn't damage their relationship.

Quickly, she stood and walked over to him. He looked up in surprise when she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him into a tight hug. "This won't change anything between us, Ci, and I will always need you," she whispered into his ear. "You've made me very glad to be your wife, my husband."

He wrapped his arms around her, enjoying the feel of her body pressed against him. Maybe Harry wasn't wrong with his ideas he thought.

Hogwarts, October 1st...

Neville sat with Luna and Susan. The trio were finding the fact that they each came from a different house to be annoying, but they were coping. After the spectacle with Harry at the beginning of the



term, several of the students approached them, wanting to know about their relationship, which they freely explained. Neville made it plainly clear that while he was involved with both girls, he would not be adding any additional women to the mix.

He looked up from his breakfast when Susan nudged him and motioned to the Head table. "They watch us everyday. It's creepy, but I get the impression they expect to see Hedwig arriving with a message."

He could see Professor Evans and her husband sitting up at the Head table, watching them. Noticing they had been spotted, both looked away.

Lily had taken Minerva's advice and reconciled with James enough to move back in with him. The students had taken to calling him Professor James, but he was seriously considering taking his wife's last name. The two Professors and the Headmaster were treated with the bare minimum of respect by the student body and they knew it.

"Harry isn't that stupid," Luna said softly, "and Daphne would never let him use his owl for something like that. Harry would send Hedwig to Longbottom Hall, but not here, not while they are in the castle."

"We know that sweetie, but they don't know Harry," Neville offered.

Luna smiled briefly then motioned to the Gryffindor table. "Now there's the real tragedy."

Neville nodded. He didn't need to look to see Hermione sitting all alone at one end of the table, Ron at the opposite end, scowling at everyone as usual and Ginny listlessly eating.

The breakup of Ron and Hermione had been tumultuous and had very nearly turned violent. Dean and Seamus had been forced to step in and stop Ron from using his wand on Hermione. After the incident, she retreated to her quarters and, unless attending class or seeing to her duties as Head Girl, she never socialized with anyone.

Ron's parents had been called to the school and he had ended up with a two month long detention, supervised by McGonagall. The one spell he had managed to get off had cut a one inch deep hole in

the wall. McGonagall was incensed by the fact that he had cast a near lethal spell at Hermione.

"They needed to learn their lesson," Susan muttered darkly. As a Hufflepuff, she took great offense at people not supporting their friends. "Ginny will come around sooner or later. She's still getting used to the idea that she won't be Harry Potter's wife."

"Harry Black," Neville corrected with a grin.

"I don't think Ginny ever stood a chance with Harry, but her mum had her believing that she would marry him from her earliest years. If any Gryffindor girl had a real chance with Harry, my money would have been on Hermione," Luna added. She stared at Ginny, her head tilted slightly in thought. "I remember Ginny and I playing house when we were little. She'd always be married to Harry Potter. Ginny grew up to be just like her mum and Harry never saw her as anything other than Ron's little sister. As to Granger, she had a different lesson to learn and I don't think she liked learning it."

"Harry Black," Neville corrected again.

Susan nodded and sighed slightly. "In all this, I just wish he hadn't left here. You two consider him a very good friend and I would have liked the chance to get to know him for myself."

Luna paused for a moment, a piece of toast held in one hand. "I don't think you need worry about that, Sue. If I know Harry, he's just as curious about you as you are about him. Daphne will explain the situation to him, and if I know her like I think I do, she'll also tell him that she doesn't intend on sharing."

Neville chuckled softly. "I don't think she need worry about that. He wasn't raised in our world and multiple marriages is an alien concept to him. In a very small way, I envy him. I sometimes feel outnumbered by you two."

Both girls turned to eye Neville. "Envy?" asked Susan in a steely voice.

"Only a little," he admitted. "Gran's over the moon about the three of us, but it still has me reeling. You two can be really scary sometimes."

"I think the one person who's probably the most shocked by the turn of events is Daphne. Harry has no idea of what a pureblood Head of House should act like as a husband. That has to be different than what Daphne expected," Neville added.

Susan and Luna exchanged a glance. Both girls knew that Neville had a tough childhood and lacked confidence in himself.

Susan reached over and patted his hand. "You don't have to worry, Neville. We won't gang up on you, unless you really muck things up. Right now, all you need to do is worry about your investiture tomorrow."

Neville smiled at the pair. With both girls coming from pure blood families, they had more rights and privileges than a muggle born would. By society's standards, he would rule the roost in their marriage. But like Harry, he had no desire to do so.

"I'm ready for that," he said confidently and they all knew he was. While he may doubt himself from time to time, he had been intensively drilled by his grandmother to assume his rightful role as the Head of the Longbottom family. He had grown up surrounded by some of the most astute politicians of their society.

He hoped Harry would be there, ready to be invested as Head of his House, as well. It really didn't mean anything, but it was a tradition that the Wizengamot gave it's approval to each new family Head. The Wizengamot didn't have the power to prevent someone from rising to the Head position, but it was a time honored tradition that every family followed as a sort of coming out for a new family leader.

Smeltings Preparatory School, October 1st...

"Now if you open your textbooks to chapter 12, you'll see we're about to explore World War II. Contrary to popular opinion, the roots of the second great war of the twentieth century had it's root in the treaty which ended the first great war..."

Dudley tuned out his teacher and looked over at Agatha Stilwell. She was a blonde girl with large breasts and a very snooty attitude. Dudley had tried several times to chat her up, but she would have nothing to do with him. She didn't even care that he was the school

boxing champion and would represent the school in the heavy weight division finals!

"She'd never go out with a tubbo like you, porky," said a voice clear as day.

He blinked and looked around, but other than his fellow students he couldn't see anyone. No one seemed to be paying him any attention, they were fixed on the teacher's lecture.

"I'm serious, you whale. No girl is going to want to have anything to do with you," added the voice.

He glanced around again, then his eyes widened. The empty chair next to him seemed to shimmer and a form took shape, sitting there looking at him with disgust.

"I've watched you play with yourself, you pervert. And I know where you stash your dirty magazines so the teachers can't find them. I'm going to tell," Myrtle said smugly.

"You better not," growled Dudley in a loud voice.

Myrtle smiled and faded from view.

"Mr. Dursley, is there a problem?" asked the teacher in a loud voice.

Suddenly Dudley realized he had left his seat and was standing over an empty desk. And everyone was watching him like he was strange or something.

Agatha Stilwell sniffed loudly and turned away in disgust. Jocks, she thought with disdain, all those punches to his head have ruined what little mind Dursley had.

Wizengamot Chambers, October 2nd...

Augusta Longbottom banged the gavel several times and the chamber fell silent. She was new to the position of Chief Witch and still getting used to it. Dumbledore had lost his position in the fall out from the discovery that the Potters were alive.

He was still a voting member of the Wizengamot, but he no longer wielded the power he once held.

"My lords and ladies," Augusta said in a loud voice. "Today we deal with two investitures before we can open our regular session. It is unusual for the sitting chief to oversee the investiture of their own heir, but such is the case today.

"I call forth Neville Franklin Longbottom, representing the ancient and noble House of Longbottom. I also call forth Harry Orion Black, representing the ancient and noble House of Black."

Both men approached the central dais and handed a thick package of documentation to the Wizengamot scribe.

A low murmur rose in the room as the sitting councilors waited for the scribe to finish examining the claims of investiture.

There was a lot of interest in Harry, who hadn't been seen since the beginning of the school year.

Neville glanced over to Harry and smiled broadly. He hadn't been sure until just before the session started that he would be sharing the session with him.

Up in the reserved guest box, Daphne, Susan and Luna sat, whispering among themselves. All of them had noted that James and Lily waited in the area reserved for petitioners.

After a long wait the scribe stood. "Madam Chief Witch?"

"Yes?"

"In the matter of Neville Franklin Longbottom, all of the documentation is correct and properly validated. He is the Longbottom of Longbottom, as the current heir is incapacitated and not expected to recover."

Neville bowed his head and Harry placed a hand on his friend's shoulder in support.

Augusta nodded and turned her attention to her grandson. "My lord, is it your intention to assume control of your family seat at this time?"

Neville looked around for a moment, then turned his gaze back to his grandmother. "It is, Madam Chief Witch. I regret that my father cannot fulfill his obligations, so I must in his stead."

Augusta nodded and looked around the room. "Are there any objections?"

After a moment of silence she turned back to the scribe. "Scribe, so note that the Wizengamot acknowledges Neville Franklin Longbottom has risen to become the Longbottom of Longbottom. Also, so note that I formally cede the family seat to Lord Longbottom. I shall retain the chief witch position until such time as this body deems it necessary to replace me."

It was an unusual move, but it had happened in the past. Neville's Grandmother would retain her position as Chief Witch, while Neville assumed the Longbottom seat among the general assembly. As Chief Witch, she normally abstained from any voting unless a tie breaking vote was required. With Neville assuming the family seat, the Longbottoms would continue to exercise their votes and keep the Chief Witch position.

"It is so noted, Madam Chief Witch."

"Very well, and the matter of Harry Orion Black?"

The scribe turned and picked up a much thicker package of parchment. "The matter of Harry Orion Black is more complicated, but all the documentation is in order. He provided copies of his adoption by Sirius Orion Black, then eighth Earl of Blackmoor and Lord Black of Black. Additionally, he included documentation from our DMLE that posthumously voids the illegal imprisonment against the eighth Earl and clearing the Earl of all charges.

"In accordance with the traditions and laws of that family, he has severed all previous ties to other families. He also accepted an outstanding Head of House betrothal contract between the Black and Greengrass families, further cementing his position as The Black. Seeing that all is in order, he is the Black of Black."

Augusta nodded and looked around the room. "Are there any objections?"

"I object!" called a voice.

A murmur ran through the crowd and heads swiveled searching for the speaker.

Madam Longbottom frowned and looked up at the gallery reserved for special guests. "Widow Malfoy, I will remind you that you have no voice in this chamber. Your husband is dead, and his son along with him. The Malfoy seat has been vacated and will be filled, as per our laws, at the appropriate time. In the meantime, you have no say in these proceedings!"

"I object damn-it! He killed my husband and son! He could have saved them, but didn't. They were under the Imperius and didn't deserve to die! He's responsible for their death, which makes him a criminal and I, as the eldest surviving Black, should assume the position."

A ripple of whispers shifted through the room as Harry looked up at Mrs. Malfoy with a puzzled expression.

"I have been given a secret memo from our own Department of Mysteries which stated that Harry Black could have saved those people who had been killed because they were marked against their will," Narcissa said loudly, while waving a parchment in one hand.

Harry blinked in surprise and he glanced up at Daphne, who simply winked at him.

"Widow Malfoy, I repeat, you have no..."

"Madam Chief Witch, regardless of the source, charges had been leveled against Mr. Black. We must hear them out," Dumbledore shouted from his seat.

Madam Longbottom looked at him sourly and turned to Harry. "My lord, do you have anything to say against this charge?"

Harry stood silent for a moment, then he shrugged. "I cannot say anything about a memo I know nothing about. Furthermore, I will swear on my magic that I do not know of any method that would

have saved Voldemort's willing followers from their deserved fate. And make no mistake, lords and ladies. They were willing to follow him."

He looked around the room for a moment, then continued firmly. "Sirius Black was the Head of the House and as such he has clearly stated who he wanted to assume his position. As the documentation I provided has proved, it was not the wife of a Death Eater."

He turned to Mrs. Malfoy and sneered at her. "Madam, you can protest all you want, but your husband was a willing Death Eater. You say he was not. You offer no proof and give no surety. I, however, am willing to allow myself to be questioned under Veritaserum about your husband's voluntary participation at Voldemort's resurrection rite. I will voluntarily give up pensive memories of events which prove your husband could not be under any form of magical control. Can you make the same offer, or are you too afraid of what you might reveal under the truth serum?"

Mrs. Malfoy stared back at Harry in alarm. He had not only thrown her charges back into her face, but he had upped the ante. She stood on the brink of prison now for making false accusations and she knew there was no escaping it.

A hush fell on the crowd and Daphne smiled tightly. Harry had thrown down the gauntlet and now all waited breathlessly to see what the Widow Malfoy would do. If she refused his challenge, she would lose all credibility.

"We are waiting, Madam Malfoy," Harry called. He was clearly angry to be placed in such a position with no warning. The only good thing he could see coming from this was the fact that Daphne's gentle political coaching was paying off.

The silence grew longer and Harry turned his attention back to the chief witch. "Madam Chief Witch, I stand before you unjustly accused and my accuser refuses to offer any proof of her claims. Since the Ministry has already stated that any who died of Voldemort's sickness were Death Eaters, I reject her claim and any calls for me to explain my actions. Furthermore, I ask that this body investigate how the Widow Malfoy happened to come upon a secret memo from a Department that is shrouded in secrecy. Surely having such a document in her possession is a crime, is it not?"



Narcissa collapsed back into her seat and looked faint. She thought to use the memo against Harry and now he was using it against her. Just having it on her person carried a one year sentence in Azkaban prison.

Madam Longbottom nodded to Harry and signaled a pair of Aurors, who were standing by the door. They began to make their way over to Malfoy, who shrank back from their approach.

"My Lord Black, surely this needn't go any further?" Dumbledore said from his seat. "I'm certain the Widow Malfoy is sorry for what she did. There's no need to involve the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry grimaced and turned towards the old man. "Dumbledore, she broke the law. Unlike you, I insist that justice be done. She will be investigated and, if necessary, tried before a court of her peers. It is a basic right all subjects of the realm have and it would be a crime to see her denied her basic rights."

In her seat, Daphne winced and suppressed a groan.

Dumbledore grimaced, knowing Harry was making a veiled comment about the lack of trial for Sirius. If Dumbledore tried to sweep Narcissa's actions under the rug, he would appear to be acknowledging his willingness to break the law and deny people their right to a fair trial.

"He's still a Gryffindor," Susan murmured with a smile. "You've got to admit, he's got class. He's managed to insult half the room in a single sentence."

"And the other half of the room love him for it," countered Luna.

Daphne looked up and examined the faces of the sitting Wizengamot members. Harry's comment had firmly put him on the side opposite Dumbledore and his faction. There were a large group of people scowling at Harry, and two other groups, the neutrals and the old pure blood families who were looking at him speculatively. It was pretty obvious that this young lord was not following in the Potter family footsteps.

The House of Black was no longer in Dumbledore's pocket.

It would be a mistake to assume that, because he opposed Dumbledore, he would automatically take up with the opposition. Daphne and Harry had spoken at great length concerning their position, and he had then broached the idea with Cicero, who was willing to give it a try.

The Blacks were going to form a new faction, a more neutral faction, that believed more in the rule of law than in the power of money.

Augusta looked around the room. "Are there any further objections to this investiture?"

It was clear that no one else wanted to tangle with the Ninth Earl of Blackmoor and the killer of Voldemort. Some people clearly looked unhappy with the proceedings but didn't dare raise any objection.

"Very well then. Scribe, so note that Harry Orion Black has risen to become the Black of Black, Ninth Earl of Blackmoor."

The scribe scribbled something in his book, then looked up. "It is so noted, Madam Chief Witch."

Augusta nodded and turned her attention back to Harry. "My lord, is it your intention to assume control of your family seat at this time?"

"As much as I would like to, Madam Chief Witch, I am attending school overseas and it would be most impractical for me to do so. I intend to ask Lord Greengrass to hold proxy for my vote and at his discretion, to recall me for important matters. Once I have finished with school, I will assume full control of my seat."

Dumbledore stood up. "Madam Chief Witch, the proxy for the Black vote has been in the capable hands of Amos Diggory these past seventeen years! I move that the Black proxy remain as it stands."

"And that is a right which I am withdrawing from Mr. Diggory," Harry replied, countering Dumbledore. "Mr. Diggory is an honorable gentleman, but he does not represent my interests in this body," he added. "It is my right, as the Black, to assign whomever I wish as proxy while I continue my schooling. If I am unable to have who I

want as proxy, then I will have no choice but to assume control now and find an alternate way to continue my schooling."

Harry turned to glare at Dumbledore. "If I am so forced, I will vote my seat and I will hire private tutors to continue my education."

Dumbledore scowled at Harry from his seat. The loss of the Black vote would put his faction in the minority. Harry's comments had made it clear that it was as good as gone and that he'd never return to Hogwarts voluntarily.

Harry looked around at the sea of faces looking back at him. "To force me to accept a proxy I do not want is a violation of our charter and an abrogation of each of our rights as members of this body. If you allow my right to chose my own proxy to be taken away from me, then you open the door to having it happen to you!"

He paused and his voice deepened. "For nearly one thousand years this body has invested its members and granted them the freedom to assign their own heirs and proxies. Are we to throw away tradition now because someone doesn't like my choice?"

"Oh, that's good. Mentioning heirs really caught their attention," Luna murmured from her seat in the gallery. She glanced over at her quotes quill, which was scribbling furiously. She wanted to get all of this down for the Quibbler.

"Someone is going to get so lucky tonight," Susan whispered back, then nudged Luna. She looked over at Daphne and bit back a laugh. Daphne was watching Harry intently, she was flushed slightly and her eyes had a slight glaze to them.

"I told you he wasn't a pure Gryffindor," Luna whispered in reply.

"I move that Lord Black be allowed to assign his own proxy in accordance with our laws and traditions!" someone shouted.

"I second!" shouted another voice, it was quickly followed by others calling for a vote.

Augusta Longbottom cleared her throat and the room settled down. "My lords and ladies, please! We already have a motion on the floor that would block the change of proxy for the Black vote. We must

deal with the first motion before we can deal with the second. Does anyone wish to second the motion put forth by Lord Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore looked around expectantly but no one seconded his motion. His expression grew pensive and unhappy as he realized it was a clear signal just how badly his support had eroded. His own group wasn't willing to allow the selection of proxies to be taken from them.

His bid to keep Harry in Britain failed as his own block of supporters showed their reluctance to vote against the Black heir who had defeated Voldemort.

Madam Longbottom banged her gavel. "Members, since the first motion failed to be seconded, there is no need for a vote on the second motion. Lord Black may assign whomever he feels trustworthy to act as his proxy."

Harry, from his position on the floor, bowed to the Chief Witch in acknowledgment.

"We will take a fifteen minute recess to let our newest members find their seats and get situated, then we will begin hearing the petitioners," Madam Longbottom said, then banged her gavel.

Greengrass Manor, October 2nd...

Harry sat with his back against the headboard of the bed. In his mind he replayed the events of the Wizengamot meeting, including the part where James and Lily appealed to the council to reinstate them to the Potter family. He smiled tightly when he recalled the Gringotts Proxy stand up and rebut their appeal. It basically boiled down to a simple fact, Magic had declared the family extinct and not even the intervention of Dumbledore could change that.

Dumbledore tried to appeal to Harry directly, but Harry simply refused, saying he did what he did for the greater good. That particular comment sent a ripple of laughter through the chamber. Apparently Dumbledore had used that comment too many times on others.

Admitting defeat, James and Lily asked for permission to formally adopt the name of Evans for their use. Harry avoided entering that

debate, and there were a number of people who wanted them to remain unnamed and disgraced, since it would reflect badly on Dumbledore.

Personally, Harry didn't care what name they used. They were out of his life and that was good enough for him.

After they left the Wizengamot chambers he had enjoyed a relaxing evening with Daphne, her parents and Neville and his fiancées.

Cicero had been surprised when Neville arrived, but he quickly warmed to the young lord. Harry had proven to be willing to listen to the older Greengrass on many issues, and had been passionate enough in his belief that the law should treat all people equally that Cicero found himself aligning more to Harry's position than Harry aligning to his. Neville's presence at the manor also signaled that Harry was serious in his statements. He was clearly forming a new power block.

"You really shocked a lot of people today," Daphne called from the bathroom. The door between the attached bath and the bedroom they were using was open.

"Oh? How so?"

"Mum suspected you'd ask Daddy to be your proxy, but he didn't have a clue. And then the way you blew apart Malfoy? You didn't just shut her up, you got her arrested. A year ago the very idea would have been laughable," she replied.

"Honestly, Daph, had she not made her accusation the way she did, I would have ignored her."

Daphne stuck her head out of the doorway and looked at him. "That's what Mum told her when the Aurors took her away."

He blinked and looked at her in surprise. "Your Mum talked with Narcissa when they removed her from the chamber?"

She nodded, then glanced around the room. "Harry, dim the lights a little?"

Confused, he nodded and waved his wand slightly, then placed it back on the bed table. "Why did you..."

He stopped and stared, his breath caught in his chest.

She stood framed in the bathroom door and the light from the bathroom highlighted how transparent her negligee was. He swallowed nervously and his eyes swept her form several times. They had seen each other naked on several occasions and Daphne often came to bed topless. But in all this time, they had yet to make love.

"You showed everyone today just what kind of man you are," she said softly. "You're powerful, magically and politically. You could order me to do anything and I'd have no choice but to obey you. But you don't want that kind of power, and yet, as strange as it might sound, that in itself is a kind of power."

She knelt on the bed and slowly moved closer to him. "The others will never know you like I know you. Today you showed them your power. Now I want to experience all that man can give me. Show me your power, Harry, make me fully yours."

She straddled him and looked down at him with a smoldering gaze.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She smiled to herself. This was classic Harry asking what she wanted. "Very sure," she whispered.

She leaned down to kiss him and he responded eagerly. After several minutes she sat up enough to peel her negligee off.

"Thank you, Sirius" he whispered half to himself.

"You want to explain why you're thanking your Godfather, while I'm straddling you?" she asked, an eyebrow arched expectantly.

He smiled and caressed her with one hand. "Because he knew about that old contract and could have pushed it off. Instead, he let it stand for me to discover. In a way, he brought us together."

Harry sat up and pulled Daphne closer to him, then he gently nipped at her neck.

She wrapped her arms around him tightly and sighed. "Thank you, Sirius," she whispered into the darkness, then she turned her attention back to the man she loved.

Number Four, Privet Drive, November 1st...

Petunia started and her left eyebrow twitched nervously. Things had taken a severe downturn in the lives of the Dursleys. Petunia knew there was magic involved, but she wasn't sure who was at fault for it.

In early September they had received numerous threats from various wizards and it prompted a visit from their freakish law enforcement people.

She shuddered in remembrance. The people had arrived on their doorstep and made a huge scene on the front lawn when they wouldn't go away like Vernon told them. It finally took Petunia pointing out the neighbors watching before Vernon grudgingly allowed them entrance to the house.

The freaks told them that they were aware of the threats against them, but until something was done, their hands were tied. They said they were arranging for the owls to be diverted so they wouldn't have to deal with them.

Petunia fidgeted throughout their visit. She knew, deep down, that their treatment of the boy had been criminal, but it had never occurred to her that the freaks had their own police force.

After they had left, things started to go very wrong for her family. Petunia's eyebrow twitched and her gaze spotted the dust motes in the sunlight streaming into the window. She had tried on several occasions to remove the motes from the house, even resorting to using the vacuum on them. That had worked only until Vernon took away her vacuum when he caught her trying to suck the motes out of the air.

The door slammed and Dudley stumbled into the house. Petunia's eyes narrowed and she stared at the faint trail of dirt.

"Dudley!" she screeched. "You tracked dirt into the house!"

"Bite me," he growled. "I'm going upstairs and I don't want to be disturbed!"

She glared at him, but since he had been expelled from Smeltings two weeks ago, he had been uncommunicative and surly. Even Vernon couldn't seem to get any answers from the boy. Neither she nor Vernon had believed the Headmaster when he told them that their son had attempted to molest a girl in school.

The girl had obviously had done something to tempt Dudley. Of course he would be upset. He was being punished for something he didn't do.

"The neighbors are watching again," said a voice behind her.

Petunia's cheek twitched violently and she whirled around to stare at the spectral figure.

"Why are you doing this?" she whined.

Myrtle grinned. "I'm here for my revenge. You are the wife of the man who killed me. You had his spawn, a foul, loathsome boy who attempts to rape innocent children. I'm here to punish you for what they have done."

Petunia swallowed nervously and looked around carefully. "If I kill them for you, will you leave me alone?"

Myrtle appeared to consider the offer. "Maybe. Let me think about it."

Ministry of Magic, Department of Mysteries, November 21st...

Harry and Daphne filed into the room to meet with their superior. The man had yet to identify himself by any name other than Clanker.

"Please, sit," said Clanker from his desk.

Harry and Daphne sat and waited for the man to speak. He had, after all, summoned them to this meeting.



"First off, I want to say how unhappy we were to discover one of our internal memos falling into the hands of the Widow Malfoy, and how pleased we were to find you pulling her teeth so neatly."

Clanker lifted a cup of tea to take a drink then he paused and looked at them closely. "The employee who gave the Widow Malfoy the memo has been... relieved of their position and declared an oath breaker."

Harry and Daphne shared a look. The oath they had taken had severe penalties for breaking it. The employee who had passed out the memo was either a squib or dead.

"We have recalled you at this point for two reasons. First, the initial reports from your instructors are extremely promising. We're very pleased with that, and because of your behavior in front of the Wizengamot, we've decided to add a course in politics to your workload. I understand, Mr. Black, that Miss Greengrass has been helping you understand your duties in regards to that body, but a little formal coaching wouldn't hurt any."

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "Are you planning on the Black vote being in your pocket?"

Clanker smiled and shook his head. "Not at all. We feel that you'll vote for what you feel is right. And for the most part, you'll also help if any legislation is presented which might impact the operation of our department. Your vote is still your own and always will be, as far as this department is concerned."

Harry relaxed and leaned back. Daphne reached over and took his hand in hers. He considered it for a moment, then nodded. It made sense to protect his employer after all.

"I should tell you, then, that Lord Longbottom, myself and Lord Greengrass are forming a new faction, one in which the rule of law would hold the predominate position. Dumbledore's influence is waning and, frankly, the pure blood position is stagnating our society. So far it's mostly neutrals who are coming over to our side, but as soon as both Neville and I are able to work the chamber on a regular basis, we'll work on swaying the more moderate pure bloods over to our way of thinking," Harry said softly. "Dumbledore's group and the

pure blood contingent are too entrenched and set in their own ways. It's time for a change."

Clanker blinked and looked at him in surprise, then a slow grin formed. A third faction would muddy the waters and subtract enough support from the other factions to keep them all from attaining a clear majority. More importantly, the DoM had hoped that sooner or later someone would come along with a fairer idea of how to handle things.

"I will report this development to my superiors, but I don't think they will be unhappy about it. We have long hoped that someone would push the Wizengamot towards a more equitable mindset," Clanker said after a moments thought.

Daphne leaned forward on her chair. "You said there was another reason for summoning us back to Britain?"

Clanker nodded and looked unhappy. "Yes. Despite the efforts of Lord Greengrass and the fact that he controls our most popular media outlet, the simple fact is, the former Potters have the potential to become a liability to Lord Black.

"We are concerned because there is a small but growing sentiment among the populace that they have been treated unfairly. Dumbledore has led an effort to portray them as sacrificing, selfless individuals. He has been stymied somewhat when confronted with the facts and asked to prove their actions. But the general population rarely considers facts as important. What matters to them isn't the truth, but what they perceive the truth to be.

"Dumbledore is a powerful and charismatic speaker with an established following. People remember him as the man who defeated Grindelwald and forget about the other people that were present and helping him that day.

"The Department considered the problem and considered that eliminating the former Potters, as attractive as that sounds, might do more damage. The simple fact is, Lord Black has a reputation that currently exceeds even that of Dumbledore. To remain effective, he needs to address the situation in some way."

Daphne nodded knowingly, while Harry looked thoughtful.

"I would like to discuss this with my parents," Daphne said slowly. "We may be able to combat Dumbledore, but what about our schooling? We cannot fight Dumbledore here, and be at Salem at the same time."

Clanker held up a hand. "We will make arrangements for your instructors to come to you at Black Manor, in Kent. Hopefully with a little luck you'll be able to return to Salem full time just after New Years day. We see this as just a small setback. In the meantime, it will also allow you opportunities to visit our facilities here and use them in your studies."

"We'll talk to Daphne's parents and look at what we can do to fight Dumbledore. While I wouldn't have shed any tears if my birth parents came to an untimely end, I do not want to be the cause of their deaths," Harry said softly.

Daphne glanced over at Harry and nodded. She'd expected him to say that. She had been tutoring him in how to behave in front of the Wizengamot and similar social situations, but he hadn't developed the ruthlessness yet that a Head of an ancient and noble family required.

Greengrass Manor, November 22nd...

"So, what do we do?" asked Harry.

He sat on the edge of the bed, looking over at Daphne, who was gazing out the window.

She sighed softly, then turned to face him. "I suppose you wouldn't agree for us to arrange fatal accidents for them?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. "As attractive as it sounds, it would only cause other problems, which I'm sure you're already aware of. Besides, you've taught me that family, no matter how much you may hate them, is to be protected. I don't want to look our children in the eye 20 years from now and tell them that their parents arranged for the deaths of their grandparents. I want them to grow up to understand the crime their grandparents committed and why they were cast out of the family."

Daphne looked at him in shock. She hadn't expected him to agree with any sort of fatal accident idea, but his reasoning surprised her. It was a very Slytherin concept to leave them alive as object lessons for future generations.

"Dad says he can run a few pieces on them, maybe only publish the negative letters..."

"No. I think it's time to offer them a way out that gets them out of our hair, and makes it appear as if they're running away. Your dad mentioned that an idea I gave him seemed to have struck gold, we can use it plus paying off my parents," Harry replied. "If we do this right, we can even pull the rug out from under that meddlesome old man."

"Oh?"

He grinned and outlined a plan that had her eyebrows climbing up to her hairline.

McGonagall's Office, Hogwarts, November 23rd...

Minerva looked down at the booklet on her desk that Dumbledore had all but thrown at her. He wanted to know who was responsible for such a dangerous book that was now making the rounds of every House in the school. She didn't bother to tell him that she had been aware of the book for several weeks now. Nor did she mention how she had confirmed it's contents to several of her girls.

But the Headmaster wasn't interested in any of that. No, he wanted to know who wrote the book and who passed it out. He was incensed by the position it had put him and the school in.

It hadn't taken long for her to figure out who wrote the book. In fact, there was really only one suspect. The same person who jumped on the House Elf issue without considering.

"Come!"

The door opened and Hermione slipped into the room. "You wanted to see me, Professor?"

McGonagall's lips pressed tightly together and she slid the small pamphlet across the desk towards Hermione. "Is this your doing, Miss Granger?"

Hermione glanced down at the booklet with the bold title of "Britain's Dirty Little Secret" and nodded.

Sighing, McGonagall rubbed tiredly at her face for a moment. "Miss Granger, by publishing and distributing that booklet you have caused yourself a world of trouble. When I first became aware of it, I managed to hide it's existence from the Headmaster and others. But he now knows about it's existence."

Hermione looked at McGonagall defiantly. "And?"

"If he can prove who published that booklet, he intends to expel them from Hogwarts, and most likely turn them over to the Aurors for publishing anti-Ministry propaganda."

Hermione gasped and paled slightly. She only wanted the other muggleborn women to know the dangers she had discovered.

"Will he discover who authored it?" she asked. Suddenly the idea of putting together a booklet didn't seem like such a smart idea at all.

McGonagall looked up at the girl intently. "Unless you have been practicing Occlumency, I would say that sooner or later he will find out. A number of girls have appealed to their parents because they found themselves in betrothal contracts and didn't understand how binding they could be. A few have threatened to stop paying for their education, which leaves us in a dilemma. The law mandates that all witches and wizards must attend school up to their OWLS, if for no other reason than to ensure they are not a danger to themselves or others.

"The parents of several students who are post OWL, are threatening to cease paying for their education. More than a few have hired on Solicitors familiar with both the muggle and wizarding law and are saying they will take action against the school and the families of the betrothed. This puts the Headmaster, and the school, into a precarious position.

"In either case, the Headmaster is not pleased at all at this 'distraction'.

Hermione trembled slightly. "What do you think I should do, Professor?" she asked in small voice.

McGonagall sighed softly and shook her head. "Hermione, I had such great hopes for you. Once upon a time, I thought that you would help provide this school with another generation of Potters. Now I find myself in a position I never thought I would be in. I am going to recommend that you resign from the school this week."

Hermione looked up sharply from staring at the floor when McGonagall mentioned a new generation of Potters. It surprised her greatly that everyone, apart from Dumbledore and the Weasleys, seemed to think she had been destined for that role.

"This is a Hogsmeade weekend. Write your letter of resignation, citing a family emergency, and give it to me on Friday evening. On Saturday, travel with the students into town and take the floo at the Three Broomsticks to the Leaky Cauldron. From there, you should be able to make your way home. Once there, you can make arrangements to continue your education overseas, if you wish."

She stood silently for a moment, a tear sliding down one cheek, then she nodded in defeat.

"Hermione," Minerva said hesitantly, "I'm sorry it had to end this way, but with you gone from the castle, there's no way the Headmaster can find out who authored the booklet."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione whispered. "Thank you for all you've done."

"I know this year has been especially hard on you," Minerva said gently. "But I think it will work out. You are too smart and too driven to allow any other outcome. And there are societies out there that aren't so... 'rigid' as our own."

Hermione smiled sadly and nodded before turning and leaving the room. It had never occurred to her that she'd be forced into dropping out of school. The only bright side was that her parents would understand the reasons behind why she wrote the book.

I hope that old man is forced to pay for hundreds of women, she thought angrily. Bastard.

McGonagall stared down at the little booklet that had already slipped into the Wizarding world outside of Hogwarts. Hermione may not know it, but her book was about to spark a revolution.

"Granger."

Hermione looked up in surprise and more than a bit of fear. She hadn't gone far from McGonagall's office and hadn't expected to encounter anyone along the way.

She blinked in surprise. "Greengrass? What are you doing here?"

Daphne motioned to a nearby classroom and Hermione reluctantly followed her in.

Daphne paced for a moment, then turned to look at her. "I never thought I would do this, but Harry would expect it of me."

"What?"

Daphne gave her a hard look and Hermione withered under her gaze. "It's partially my own fault. Harry told me you'd end up like this after I told him about our conversation. The funny thing is, last year, if someone told me I'd be helping you, I'd have laughed in their face."

Hermione looked at the girl for a moment in shock. "So why then are you helping me? For that matter, how are you helping me?"

Daphne pulled out a small envelope and handed it to Hermione. "I don't like you, Granger. You're too smug and arrogant and you leap without looking. This time you landed in trouble you couldn't get out of. But I know that, deep down, Harry still cares what happens to you, even if he's still hurt and angry with you. Despite my better judgment, I know he'd still help you and he'd approve of me helping you. That," she said, pointing to the envelope in Hermione's hands, "is your acceptance letter into the Seattle School of Sorcery. McGonagall told me about the troubles you were going to encounter and asked if there was anything I could do to help. I explained your

situation to my father and he contacted a friend, who was able to arrange your admission."

Daphne wasn't about to mention that she had chosen the school for it's distance from Salem. It was a decent enough school, and Granger would thrive there. But Daphne was a bit insecure about Granger. The farther away Hermione was from Harry, the better she felt.

Hermione looked down at the envelope in wonder and her lower lip trembled slightly. It wasn't forgiveness from Harry, but it still humbled her.

"You were tricked by a master," Daphne said in a gentler tone. "Learn from it and contact us in a year or two. I think I know my future husband enough to know he'll let you back into his life. You'll probably be the only one he'll let back in. Who knows? In a few years, we might even become friends."

Hermione looked up at Daphne and gave her a teary smile. "Thank you," she whispered. Daphne nodded and left the room. She still had one other group of people to meet with today.

Hermione squared her shoulders and strode from the room. She had packing to do and a letter of resignation to write.

Professor's Quarters, Hogwarts...

Lily stared at the person standing in the doorway. She never expected to see this girl standing here!

"May I come in?" Daphne asked.

Numb from surprise, Lily nodded and stepped aside. Daphne walked into the room and glanced around for a moment.

"Lils, I think I found that book..."

James entered the room, holding a book in his hands. He spotted Daphne and skidded to a halt.



"James, we have a visitor," Lily said softly, then she turned back to Daphne. "Please, won't you sit down?" She gestured to a large couch.

"What's she doing here?" James said in a snarl.

Daphne sat and raised one elegant eyebrow at him. "Sit and we'll converse like civilized adults Professor, or I'll leave and tell my future husband that we'll go with an alternative plan."

"James, please," Lily pleaded. "Let's hear her out first."

Grudgingly, James sat in a chair facing Daphne. Lily took another chair and sat on the very edge. "Can I get you something? Coffee? Tea?"

Daphne shook her head. "Thank you, but no. I think it is best if I were to explain my visit today so I can leave. To be blunt, our employer is concerned over Dumbledore's campaign to smear my betrothed's name."

"Well, that's just too damn bad," snarled James.

Daphne glanced at him for a moment, then turned to Lily. "I see this is a waste of my time. I had come here to offer you an option out, but instead, I'll suggest they go with their first inclination and put out a death contract on you both."

Lily gasped and James sat up. "You wouldn't."

"In a heartbeat," Daphne replied. "Don't think I'm one of Dumbledore's lackeys. I see nothing wrong with eliminating people who stand in our way. It's an attitude that my fiancée is coming to appreciate."

"But..." Lily said weakly.

Daphne held up a hand. "I am not one of your pliable Gryffindorks. You hurt my Harry. In my mind, there can be no greater sin than that and you both deserve to die for it. Harry, however, wants to keep you both alive, so that we may use you as an object lesson for future generations."

"What do you mean?" asked James despite his anger.

"When our children ask what happened to their grandparents, they will be told of your disgrace and why you are not part of their lives. And they will be told that this is the price one pays for hurting family."

Daphne paused and took in the two adults before her. "My family was never part of the Voldemort crowd. Not because we believed the pure blood drivel they were selling, but rather that we hold family as the highest, most important thing in our lives. Suborning our will to Voldemort would have put him above the family. Now Harry is becoming my family and he appreciates the philosophy of family first."

James stared at her in horror, his mouth opening and closing without a sound.

Lily lowered her gaze. "What is it you wish for us to do? Dumbledore wants us to fight, even if that means smearing Harry's name. I don't think I can do that. I've done enough... too much to hurt him already."

James glanced over at Lily and his demeanor abruptly deflated. He wiped at his face tiredly and Daphne noticed for the first time that his hair was streaked with gray.

"Family is important. It's a lesson my father taught me and one I was supposed to teach my son," he said with a heavy sigh. "Lils is right. Any further fighting is pointless. The damage is done and continuing to fight only makes things even worse."

Daphne looked at the two for a moment, then she reached into a pocket and pulled out a sealed envelope and handed it to Lily.

"In that envelope you will find a Gringotts draft for a tidy sum that will enable you to relocate, perhaps someplace warmer, like one of the Pacific nations. There is a school in Wellington, New Zealand that needs teachers. I would suggest submitting your resignation early and planning to be out of England before the New Year."

"And if we don't?" asked James in a strangled voice.

Daphne shrugged. "Then things will become... unpleasant. You are forgetting that my father owns most of the major Wizarding publications in this country. I am fairly certain he'd be willing to allow us space to counter the old man's campaign, and smear you two until you don't dare show your face in public. While the truth is bad enough, presented properly, I'm fairly certain we could have most of Wizarding Britain demanding you be tossed through the veil in a month. Rather than resorting to such extremes, we offer you another option. You are both young and that draft gives you an opportunity for a fresh start somewhere other than Britain. You could even have more children."

"James?"

He turned and looked at his wife.

She sat, gripping the arms of her chair tightly. Tears of anguish streamed down her face. "James, all we do by fighting is hurt him more. Please, no more, we've done too much harm as it is."

He nodded unhappily. "I've always wanted to see the Pacific ocean," he murmured weakly.

Daphne stood. "Excellent. I will speak with my father tonight and he will omit any additional references to you. He has several contacts among the Board of Governors and I expect he'll find out sometime in the next week or two that you've submitted your resignations?"

James nodded. He couldn't look her in the eye, his shame was that great.

Daphne turned and made her way to the door. Before she could reach it she heard Lily say, "Please, tell him that we're sorry."

"It's not up to me to grant forgiveness," she replied without looking back, then she opened the door and stepped out of the room. She was satisfied. With Harry's parents leaving, Dumbledore would be at a loss to continue depicting them as victims.

Little Whinging, Surrey, December 1st...

Vernon closed the door behind him with a heavy sigh. He felt old and worn out. The past month had been hell for him and it showed in his every movement.

Dudley had been arrested twice since he had been expelled from school. They had managed to get him released, but it had added considerably to the tension in the home. And then there was the issue of the ghost!

The ghost had cost him a promotion and very nearly cost him his job. She had appeared at the plant on the one day he was supposed to give a detailed briefing to the upper level executives of Grunnings' parent company. By the time he began his presentation, he was nearly insane with anger and mistakenly took it out on what he thought was an administrative assistant of one of the executives.

How was he supposed to know she was actually the Chief Financial Officer for the corporation?

Even Petunia agreed that it had to be magic that caused him to call the woman a "stupid bint", but no amount of groveling could retract the insult.

And all the while Myrtle floated around the boardroom, taunting him. It was only the fact that he had collapsed with dangerously high blood pressure that prevented him from losing his job completely. The doctors hired by the company reported that he was under too much pressure, which resulted in his blood pressure climbing to near astronomical levels. The company wisely decided that because he had been a faithful employee for so many years they would begin the process of gently easing him out of the company.

He looked up and noted Myrtle waving gleefully at him. She didn't show up often at work, but she was often here in the house. Her very presence interfered with the radio and telly, so they couldn't even use that to ignore her.

Dudley was rarely in the house these days, and Petunia had become obsessive about cleaning. So obsessive he had no choice but to cook for himself. The first and only time he had left dirty dishes in the sink, Petunia had spent two hours screeching at him. He was certain she'd still be screeching, but one of the neighbors had called the police about the noise.

He slowly trudged over to his chair and sat with a sigh of relief. For a brief moment all was quiet and he could relax and close his eyes.

"Do it," hissed a voice he had come to hate. "Do it and you'll feel so much better! You'll finally be free."

"I will," murmured Petunia.

Vernon's eyes sprang open just as the cricket bat came crashing down on his head.

"I will do it!" shouted Petunia over and over. Blood spattered everywhere and Myrtle clapped her hands happily.

Mrs. Number 5 Privet Drive forced down the urge to throw up and reached for her phone. Across the street she could clearly see Petunia hitting her husband with some kind of weapon.

"Hello, police? I want to report a murder at..."

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,  
December 1st...

Dumbledore sat down in disgust and glared at the portraits that snickered at him.

"I warned you that your plans were wrong," sneered Phineas Nigellus Black from a wall.

"But no, the great Albus Dumbledore is never wrong!" said Amando Dippet. "And now look at where things are. You lost two teachers mid term and have to scramble to find replacements before the Ministry assigns someone."

"Silence!" Dumbledore thundered. He leaned over his desk looking up at the portraits that were mocking his efforts.

He had just come from a meeting of the Board of Governors, where they told him that the former Potters had resigned their positions. They also told him that the Board had been close to a decision to fire the former Potters and had happily accepted their resignation.

No matter how hard he tried to fix things, things just wouldn't stay fixed! He slumped back in his chair with a bitter taste in his mouth and wished he had never heard of the name Potter. Harry's parents had become a liability for the school, and despite the publicity, only a small portion of the Wizarding world seemed willing to listen to his efforts to paint the Potters in a favorable light.

"All is not lost," he mumbled to himself. He had still friends in high places, he could still hurt that little shit who had caused him so much trouble and derailed his wonderful plan.

"You have visitors, Dumbledore," said the sorting hat.

He glanced sourly at the hated headpiece. Since the sorting it seemed to take a perverse pleasure in tormenting him.

"Come!" he shouted.

The door opened and he blinked in surprise at Cicero Greengrass and another man walked into his office. He recognized the other man as one of the Prophet's best investigative reporters.

"Albus, can you spare a moment of your time?" asked Cicero with a bit of a grin.

Oh, bugger me, what do they know? He thought to himself.

"I'm sure you remember Malcolm Larson, Class of '74? He's been on my payroll for a number of years as one of our best reporters. He's just come from a very interesting interview with Gustav Grindelwald and was hoping to get some questions answered." He sat down and smiled benignly.

Malcolm flipped open a muggle pad and looked up eagerly at the Headmaster. "Yes. I'd like your comments about some statements Grindelwald made concerning your relationship with him and about your sister, Ariana."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and the blood drained from his face. He looked over at Cicero. "What do you want?" he asked in a whisper.

Cicero smirked at the old man. "Malcolm understands what he learned from his interview can only be printed if I allow it. As for you? Your silence is the price of your story not being printed. My daughter and future son in-law deserve to start out their lives without your interference."

It was the end and he knew it. Grindelwald knew far too much and wouldn't care if the press crucified Albus. Hell, Grindelwald wouldn't care if they killed him, not after what Albus had done to his former lover.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I'm afraid I have no other choice. I will agree to your terms. I will stop my attacks on Lord Black."

Cicero leaned forward. "Will you give an oath to that effect?"

Dumbledore flinched and pulled out his wand, then gave the oath.

"Malcolm, wait for me outside. I want to have a few words with the Headmaster before we return to the office," Cicero ordered.

The other man nodded and left.

"You know you brought this on yourself, Albus. Had you only left things well enough alone, people would have figured you made a mistake and left it at that. But by attacking my future son-in-law, you started a war. Harry would have been happy to let you live your life, but he couldn't allow you to do anything that would hurt Daphne. And your attacks were doing just that."

Cicero leaned back in his chair and grinned at the sour old man. "I'm rather pleased with the boy, really. He was the one that came up with the idea that you might not have killed Grindelwald like everyone believed. He said your tendency to give second chances probably meant you stuffed him in a hole somewhere and tricked the rest of the world into thinking he was dead."

He grinned slightly. "Imagine my surprise when we learned that Harry was right. You defeated him and stuffed him away in a German prison. Gustav really didn't have very many nice things to say about you, I'm afraid. And he shed some light on your father that puts your muggle loving facade in doubt, as well."

Cicero stood and turned for the door. Once there, he paused and turned back to Dumbledore. "Forget politics, Albus," he said softly. "Enjoy your remaining years as Headmaster and let others run the world from here on."

Dumbledore nodded unhappily while a variety of portraits chortled at his discomfort. Cicero turned and left the office.

He met up with Malcolm at the bottom of the stairs and the two men started their walk out of the castle and toward the edge of the wards.

"Malcolm?"

"Sir?"

Cicero stopped and turned to look at the man. He had been a good employee for a number of years now. "I know that you'd prefer to publish this, but I'll make you a promise. Continue to research the background details and start writing it up. We won't publish it in the Prophet. No, a story like this deserves a special delivery. In five years time I'll put you in touch with a book publisher who will pick up the story."

Malcolm's eyes lit up and he nodded eagerly. A book deal would be a wonderful accomplishment! It would take him several years to write the story anyway, as his regular job kept him very busy. Waiting a few years was no burden.

Cicero clapped the younger man on his shoulder and nodded towards the apparation point in the distance.

Black Manor, January 1st...

Harry watched his wife of less than two weeks bustle around the sitting room, making sure their friends and family have enough to eat and drink, and he smiled. If someone had told him a year ago that he'd be married and enjoying his life, he wouldn't have believed them.

He married Daphne on the 21st of December in a traditional druid rite, surrounded by friends and family. Then the happy couple had spent several days alone at Black Manor. Their honeymoon would come this summer, when they could take two months and really see



the world. Harry and Daphne planned to blend both the muggle and magical worlds during their honeymoon.

"Harry!"

The shout shocked him from his musings and he looked up to see Neville grinning at him.

"Harry, mate, you're staring at Daphne again."

His bride blushed and smiled at him. The last two weeks had been truly magical for them both. Daphne discovered that she wanted to do things she never would have considered before, just to please her husband. He was gentle and considerate, better than anything she had imagined.

"Neville," chided Luna, "leave off. He's newly wed."

Harry smirked at his friend. "Your problem, Longbottom, is you won't know which wife to stare at, and staring too long at either will get you in trouble."

Neville had already announced his scheduled wedding for the coming summer. Both Harry and Daphne agreed to stand with the happy triplet when they exchanged their vows.

Neville nodded. "I already get in trouble for that," he replied, then winced when Susan smacked his arm.

"He's not that bad," Susan said. "I think that most of the time he just feels outnumbered."

Harry reached out and grabbed the hand of Daphne as she passed him by. She looked at him and smiled, letting herself be pulled into his lap.

"Things have really changed since the start of the year," Neville said, trying to drive the conversation onto safer topics. "Hogwarts was pretty tense for a while, and no one expected Dumbledore to resign from the Wizengamot."

Harry glanced over at McGonagall, who was sitting with Daphne's parents and Professor Flitwick.

"Normally, I don't like to discuss the school and what's happening, but it has changed from the beginning of the year. With the Evans' leaving school, things calmed down. The Headmaster is spending most of his days now concentrating on school matters, rather than politics," Minerva added.

She didn't want to add that he also spent most of his days holed up in his office. The student body had lost a lot of the respect and awe they once held for him and he knew it.

Harry raised his glass. "Well, here's to the new Headmistress of Hogwarts. I can't think of a more qualified person for the job."

Everyone raised their glass and Minerva blushed. It came as a complete surprise to everyone when Dumbledore announced that he would retire after the next school year. He said he wanted time to write his memoirs and he wanted to take a year to help Professor McGonagall transition into the position of Headmistress. The Hogwarts Board of Governors accepted his resignation without comment or protest.

"I must admit, we miss you and your lovely bride, Mr. Black," Professor Flitwick said.

The room quieted down and all eyes turned to Harry.

"As much as I'd like to say I miss Hogwarts, I think that things had to happen the way they did before things could change. Hogwarts has new Defense and Potions professors and a great many of the bigoted students are gone. Now, perhaps, things can improve."

He paused and looked at Minerva. "I wouldn't change a thing that has happened to me in the past six months. I have a beautiful wife, and my old school now has a chance to really be the best. I might wish I hadn't been forced to leave, but I can't argue that my life hasn't significantly improved."

Daphne smiled to herself and tightened her grip on him. She wouldn't change anything either!

Epilogue...

The Blacks were one of the most successful husband/wife teams ever hired by the Department of Mysteries. They worked full time for the department for nearly thirty years before retiring to pursue other interests. By the time they left the department, they were acknowledged leaders in their respective fields, even if most of their research was secret.

Daphne Black went on to co-author the definitive book on ward casting with her husband, the Earl of Blackmoor. Harry also made a name for himself in curse breaking. They ended up with four children, first a boy and a girl, then as a surprise, a set of twin boys.

Daphne also went on to author an update to her Grandmother's definitive book, combining muggle and magical techniques. Her husband had enthusiastically helped her work on that volume.

Susan Longbottom turned out to be fantastic with small children. With help from her husband and her sister wife, she opened a small school for pre-Hogwarts ages. The Blacks were among the first to sign their children up.

Neville went on to spend two terms as Minister of Magic.

Harry's parents finally settled on using the name of Evans. They stayed at Hogwarts for just a half year before leaving England forever. They settled in Australia, where they had another child.

Albus Dumbledore retired from Hogwarts and attempted to write his own version of what happened in a set of memoirs that were said to contain even more falsehoods than the combined works of Gilderoy Lockhart. Fourteen copies of the book were sold before it was removed from the shelves.

Hermione Granger left Hogwarts in much the same way as she had entered; friendless. She dropped out of sight and wasn't heard from again until she returned a notice refusing an offer of enrollment for her daughter. She attended a muggle university, where she met a man and fell in love. She spends her days watching over her two children and writing a very popular children's series about a magical boy and his friends.

She never reconnected with Harry Black, but her booklet became an underground sensation. Despite the best efforts of the Ministry, they

were unable to prevent the book from falling into the hands of muggleborn witches. The situation continued for nearly twenty years before the coalition of Black/Longbottom rammed several laws down the throats of the Wizengamot.

The coalition forcefully proved that the Wizarding world policies were slowly killing off British Wizarding Society, as the population dwindled and growth had stopped. Under Minister Longbottom's leadership, it was just the first in a long line of many reforms granting equality to many races and peoples.

Ronald Weasley married Lavender Brown. Before the marriage was six months old he tried to enforce his will on her. She beat him so badly he ended up in St. Mungo's for a week. Now they appeared to be a happily married couple, with many commenting on much Ron appeared to be just like his father, Arthur - mild mannered and slow to anger. Unlike his parents, however, he and Lavender stopped at one child.

Ginny Weasley never married. She refused several suitors, much to her parent's dismay, saying she would have Harry Potter, or no one. She died at the young age of 54, still waiting for Harry to come for her.